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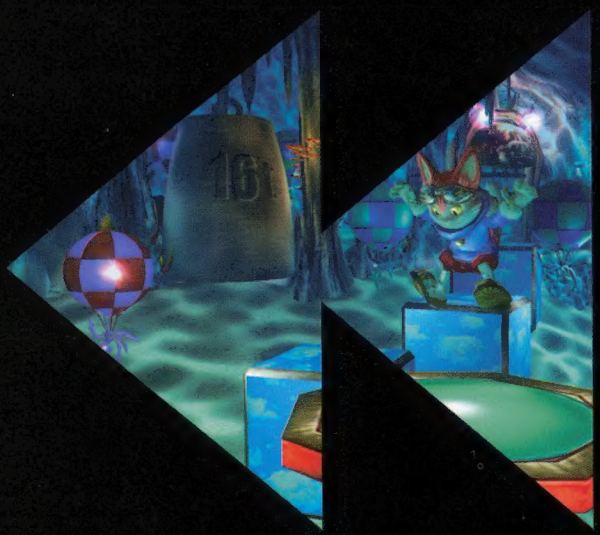

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welcome...

volume one / issue eleven

Sitting, blurry eyed, 8:00 a.m., September 25 (brutally early by **play** standards), I've just hung up from a teleconference from Seville, Spain, during which selected members of the press were granted access to the Stamper brothers, along with Ed Fries from Microsoft, regarding the sale of Rare Ltd. to Microsoft.

When the NES hit in the UK in the mid-'80s, a company called Ultimate—Play the Game created a specialized subdivision named Rare, whose primary goal was to develop games for the new console. A decade and a half later, that little division just sold for $430 million.

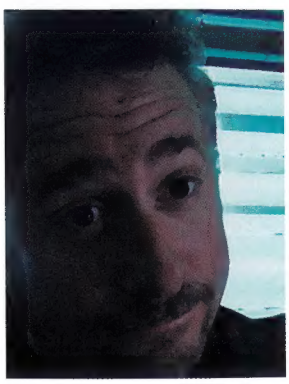
My first experience with Rare dates back to 1988, when Acclaim published their *Wizards and Warriors* for the NES. By the time I beat it—oh, around '91—*Battletoads* was out, the first 8-bit game with parallax scrolling and simulated rotation. Back then, beating a Rare game was a major achievement: They were brutally difficult, but so superior you'd chip away like a happy drone for weeks until reaching what usually amounted to a couple of pictures followed by the words "Thank You for Playing." Next came *Battletoads in Battlemaniacs* for SNES, which, I'm proud to say, a pal and I beat playing two-player, an inhuman feat that proved just how nutty we really were, further sealing my fate as a videogame journalist. The Battletoads were so etched into my brain by the early nineties, I began eating flies; point being, Rare has always made epic, unforgettable, ground-breaking action games... but always for Nintendo. When Nintendo discovered Rare could translate hi-resolution workstation CGI to the SNES, they snatched them up (the company's first non-Japanese affiliation) and the union soon redefined 2D gaming with *Donkey Kong Country*, and then caused a sensation on the war-torn battlefields of the '90s fighting-game craze with *Killer Instinct*. Graduating to 3D on the N64, Rare raised the bar on action-adventure gaming with *Banjo Kazooie* and their epic space opera *Jet Force Gemini*, not to mention introducing toilet humor to mainstream America with the world's most underrated game, *Conker's Bad Fur Day*.

All totaled, after 20-plus games selling over 19 million copies, the lights have now dimmed on what was one of the most fruitful publisher/developer relationships in the relatively short history of videogames—and Microsoft's hand is on the dimmer switch. It can be said that Microsoft has captured one-half of Nintendo's magic, although given the state of game development today, that depends on how you look at it. There was a time when no one could touch Rare, but these days, any number of developers, given the budget and support, can render gold. The advantage Rare has is an uncanny ability to innovate and captivate, and they're known for making consoles rise above their limitations—a scary proposition considering the Xbox's specs.

Time for my two cents: The one question I *had* to rattle off in the teleconference was whether or not we might see *Battletoads* again, as I see this as the union's biggest opportunity at scoring a brand worthy of TV, movie, and merchandising status. Zitz, Rash and Pimple are three of the best action characters ever, and the gameplay model lends itself to 3D perfectly. *Perfect Dark* is great, but *Halo* is the 'box's FPS king, Banjo's too cute for the Xbox, and Conker—well, he freaked America out.

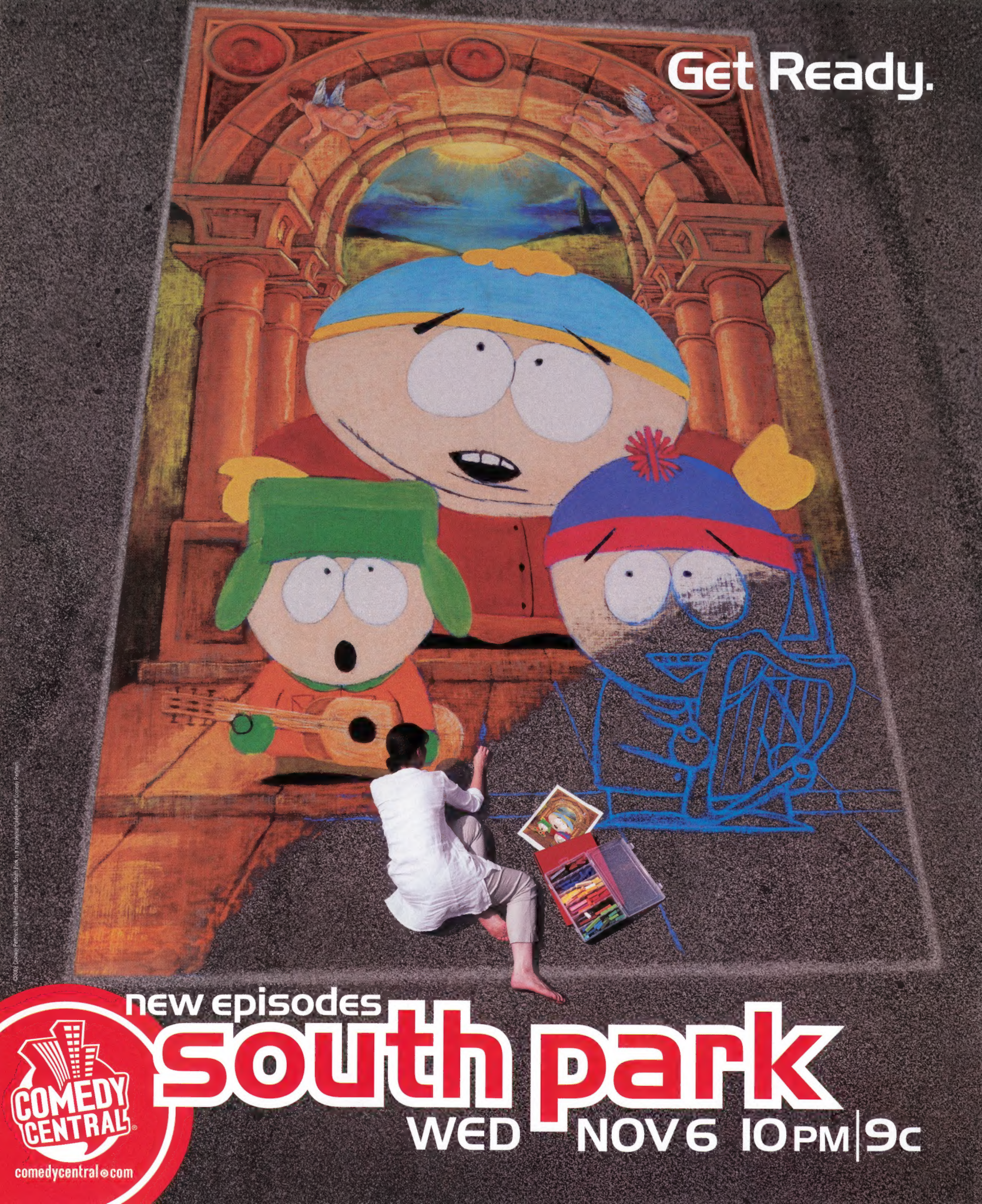
On the Nintendo side, hear me now, and hopefully believe me later: They should buy Treasure (the Japanese developer famous for *Gunstar Heroes*). Right now. Today. Given the opportunities Rare was afforded over the years, like long lead times and suitable budgets, Treasure could and would become gaming's premier action-game maker, just as Rare did. If Nintendo does not do this, or at least try, I seriously question their desire to stay in the race. Since Treasure is currently developing *Wario Land* for them, the door is swung wide open. Nintendo also needs to exercise a little humility and reunite themselves with the industry. For a decade I had close, personal relationships within the company; now a PR firm drops off padlocked consoles in steel boxes. I want the old Nintendo back or for Microsoft to just buy them, too. By the way how cool is that South Park ad!? **play**

"Graduating to 3D on the N64, Rare raised the bar on action-adventure gaming..."



Dave Halverson, Editor in Chief

play magazine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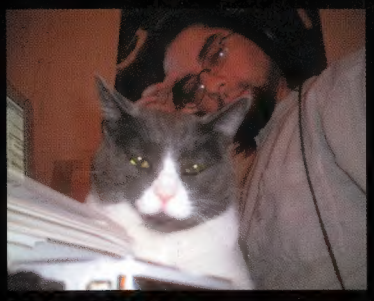
Jon M Gibson
Executive Editor

The fight was intense. But **play**'s the seemingly gentle Mr. Hobbs, couldn't absorb any more of Jon's *Animal Crossing* slander (especially the comment about his inexcusable choice of wallpaper). Jon regrets everything.

Brady Fiechter
Editorial Director

If the urban legend regarding the existence of The Mothman is true, it would appear that this photo could very well be the conclusive evidence believers have been yearning for. You be the judge.



Michael Hobbs
Art Director

The latest idea to tickle Mr. Hobbs' brain is this: What if the unaccounted for mass of the universe (roughly 90 percent) is actually caused by the energy being exerted from other dimensions?

Nelson Lui
Assistant Art Director

Naughty Nelson, always trying to sneak a peek at the "competition."

Tom Ham
Contributing Writer

See Tom in Japan. See Tom playing games at TGS. See Tom sweating profusely under blistering Tokyo sun. See Tom with Capcom booth babe. See Tom's imagination run rampant with glee.

Gabe Swarr
Contributing Artist

Young Gabe has dwelled in the depths of animation for long enough! Now he has emerged from his humble beginnings at Spumco to bring the world his newest creation: Mode 7 (**pg. 017**).

www.bigpantsmouse.com

Editorial

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play magazine

026 cover story / ratchet & clank

Go deep behind the scenes for the inside scoop on how Insomniac sculpted the PS2's premiere epic for 2002

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Gabe Swarr's irreverent new **play**-exclusive comic

050 zone of the enders 2

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130 the ring

Based on the 1998 Japanese horrorshow, *Ringu*, this gorgeously budget American adaptation promises a lot more than meets the eye.

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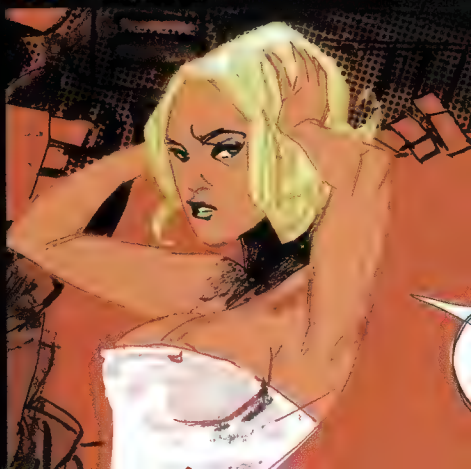

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THIS JUSTIN

To keep it short and sweet (for we all are *very* busy in this industry), thank you so much for the extremely appropriate and immensely moving editor's note in the *Contra: Shattered Soldier* issue (**play 010**). "Realistic violence" in games is a much greater concern than some may think. As a game designer, I truly feel that violence is nothing more than a creative crutch for developers to fall back on. Let's keep our fingers crossed that those who strive to give gamers the *fun* they deserve win back the development trend.

As well, I'd like to drive home the fact that everyone in the press are just as important in the game development process as those who are knee deep in projects. Magazines, web sites, etc. all do a great deal to educate and influence gamers about our supreme hobby. Basically, you act as the collective vote and voice of millions of players. There is no denying that developers the world over read the works that you toil to deliver every day—and are influenced by them as well.

In turn, many of the games that go into development are collective creations from not only the actual designers, programmers, artists, etc., but also the editors and writers in the media (who represent the gamers themselves).

Thank you so much for providing us with a means to communicate with the masses. Together, our efforts work to push this industry forward, evolve it, and keep it shining—as what we all know it truly is the most incredible form of media available.

Justin L.
via e-mail

Honestly, I was a little nervous about that one, but the response has been really positive. My thanks to everyone who wrote in, even the few that really get off on hard-core violence (glad they live in another state). It's refreshing and motivating to hear from developers and readers such as yourself on this subject. Just because *GTA III* worked, doesn't mean it's time to start upping the body count. *GTA III* is a big, fun, well-designed mission-based adventure that excels in many areas. It's our experience that what people really want is to be moved in some way by games, be it through violence, drama, science fiction, or what have you. A certain amount of violence has, should, and will always be a huge part of gaming, but when it starts looking like the evening news, it seems that's where many people draw the line. Watching someone get de-boned like a fish will always be cool, as is storming the beach at Normandy in *Metal of Honor*, eliminating terrorists in *SOCOM* or watching Dante or Buffy skewer demons. Violence is at the core of most games, but not in the same way it's perpetrated on society. It's nice to know there are still people out there that care about the difference.

As for us making a difference, well, that's wonderful to hear you say. We take what we do more seriously then anyone probably realizes and are humbled by the development process, which we are so honored to critique.

CAMERA CATASTROPHE

Congrats on a *very* great magazine. I love the layout. However, I have something to tell you about your *Super Mario Sunshine* review. Fun? Yes! Clever? Sure! But it isn't perfect. Actually, the camera system sucks!!! I spend so much time adjusting it that I hate it. I have to be honest: The camera system was the *only* flaw, but a very important one.

For me, *Mario* is *Mario*—I've played it since I was 12. I am 25 now, so I write this because I know that you love it. But don't let it blind you just because it's *Mario*. If it isn't perfect, it isn't perfect.

Wilfredo Rodriguez
San Juan, Puerto Rico

You are not alone in your criticism of the camera system in *Mario*, but in our eyes, the manual camera is the best and *only* solution for a game of this type. There is so much three-dimensional movement in the game that any form of auto camera would severely hinder the game's quick nature. To us, controlling the camera is completely intertwined with controlling the character, almost as if your are playing a dual-stick FPS—both sticks get equal use. We understand how this could frustrate those who wish not to think about the camera, but trust us; let the camera become a part of the control—let it become second nature—and we think you'll find that Miyamoto's solution is correct.

THE APOCALYPTIC 'EDGE'

First, I want to say that I really like your magazine; it has a nice layout, and I really enjoy your interviews. Which brings me to the focus of my letter: 3DO.

Seriously, what's the deal with these guys? Why are they so lame? Who do they think they're fooling with this new "quality over quantity" focus? A note to game developers everywhere: Basing your game on the *Book of Revelations* is not "dark." Having the Vatican be Satan's home is not "edgy"—it's obvious. Get real. You guys aren't subverting anything. It sounds like you got all of your ideas from some 15-year-old's creative writing project (You know, the kid in the Marilyn Manson shirt wearing all black who writes poetry about how nobody understands him? Yeah, that kid.)

And the statement "we decided to make Pestilence a woman, and we wanted some sex appeal in the game, and she seemed like the right one to be a woman—just based on disease, venereal disease and all that" is flat out misogynist.

I know it's not your guys' fault that 3DO sucks. I just needed to vent about it. But for future reference to anyone

"For me, *Mario* is *Mario*—I've played it since I was 12. I am 25 now, so I write this because I know that you love it. But don't let it blind you just because it's *Mario*. If it isn't perfect, it isn't perfect."

—Wilfredo Rodriguez

making a game: If you have to tell people that your game is "dark," "edgy" or "twisted," then it's probably *none* of the above.

Ryan Croson
via e-mail

Well, when we first started pursuing our feature on 3DO's latest effort, *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (*Part One* of the interviews is in play 010; *Part Two* begins on pg. 46), we assumed there'd be a few flustered folks out there.

Of course, it's 3DO, the publisher responsible for some of the most poorly reviewed games in the last decade. But the main reason, which is under the surface for lots of gamers, is the 3DO philosophy. Up until now, they've always had ridiculous production schedules and underpaid programmers, allowing for a quick turnaround of budget-priced titles (aimed strictly at the kiddie audience; they were never meant for the older crowd). Spend very little, make a shitload—that's 3DO. And while they'll still continue with their *Army Men* franchise—among other silly things—*Four Horsemen* represents a big twist in their game plan. Instead of six months, the game is over three years in the making; and they have a multi-million-dollar budget to boot. That's never a surefire guarantee for a "AAA" title, but it sure as hell is a nifty insurance policy.

As for the concept: You've got a point about the kid in the creative writing class; but there's nothing wrong with toying around with a story that hasn't truly been explored in a videogame. It's a great setup for action; and the settings are draped with mood. And with Simon Bisley attached, it's hard to just dismiss the game completely. But the game doesn't release until late 2003, so the chips could fall either way.

They're just trying somethin' different; if you want to persecute 'em, the Pope has the ticket right ahead of you.

SLAYER ONE

I wanted to commend you guys on, once again, providing kick-ass coverage of games that would otherwise have been left to the mercy of other publications. My recent purchase, *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* on the Xbox, is a result of your magazine's excellent coverage. I was really expecting this title to go down the pit of Hellmouth like 95% of movie and TV games do. I wouldn't have even given it a chance if I didn't read about it in **play**. *Buffy* is currently my favorite game. *Mario Sunshine*, *SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs*, and my beloved *Halo* are now getting minor playtime when compared to *Buffy*. And just when you think the game is great, they surprise you with codes. *Buffy* has an "arena" code that you input on the extras screen (press Y, Y, W, B, B, Y, Y, Y, Y, Y, W, B) which not only gives you control Buffy with all her moves and randomly placed weapons, but if the second through fourth player controllers are plugged into the Xbox, all your friends have to do is press "start" when Buffy is near an enemy to take control... Yes, four-player! You can also possess different enemies (by pressing "start" next to the closest one. Just when you're thinking The Collective has done it all, there's a "debug" mode where you can control the enemies and even Buffy's friends in the regular game! This one is a bit tricky: power-up your Xbox, input the code on the extras screen, play one of the arenas, and then quit the arena at any time, then start a new game (or load your saved game). When you are next to an enemy or friend, press "start" on the second controller to posses him/her...

I hope other people will have as much fun with these codes as I have. Thanks again, guys. I wouldn't be loving this title—or even playing it—were it not for you.

Mike Gable
via e-mail

Thanks man. *Buffy* is hella cool, but we don't print codes.

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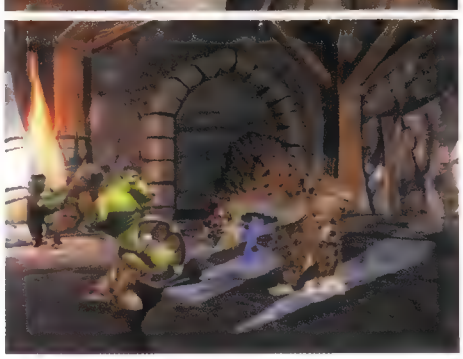
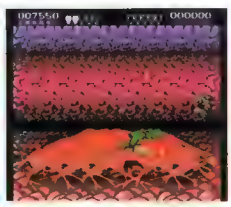
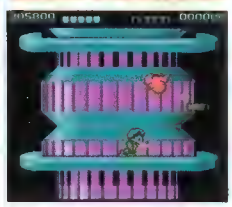
ONE SMALL STEP FOR RARE, ONE GIANT LEAP FOR XBOX

Microsoft whips out its checkbook and buys a developer as powerful as its console







Above: Rare's Toadally great Battletoads (NES) and Battletaods in Battlemaniacs (SNES)

On September 24, Microsoft made it official, announcing it had purchased U.K.-based Rare Ltd., one of the world's leading videogame developers, creators of such legendary titles as *Donkey Kong 64, Killer Instinct, Banjo Kazooie, GoldenEye 007, Perfect Dark, Jet Force Gemini, Conker's Bad Fur Day*, and *Star Fox Adventures*, among others. Under terms of the $375 million cash transaction, Rare has begun creating exclusive console games for the Xbox.

Speaking with Microsoft VP of Game Content Ed Fries, Rare chairman and Technical Director Chris Stamper, and brother Tim, Co-Founder and Creative Director from Seville, Spain, the team had nothing but niceties to say about their relationship with Nintendo and told **play** first-hand that their philosophy wouldn't change in terms of making epic action games, and that they may even produce them a bit faster—to which we're not holding our breath. The brothers also let out an optimistic rumble when asked if the Battletoads may re-surface, which, in our estimation, would improve the quality of life on a global scale—but again, breath not being held.

Rare's first title for the Xbox will be *Kameo*, an original adventure about a beautiful fairy princess and her bid to overthrow a dark king. Originally slated for release on GameCube, since *Kameo* is well underway, the game is pegged for release in Spring 2003, which, by Rare standards, roughly translates to Christmas 2003—but hey, who's counting? Also under development is the highly anticipated sequel to *Perfect Dark* and the new manga-style Joanna is looking pretty hot. The company is expecting to develop at least five games over the next two years in a variety of genres, including racing, shooters and platformers, followed by hell freezing over. Chris, Tim and their talented team of developers and designers will continue to work out of the Rare compound in Warwickshire, England, which is more secure than Britney Spears underpants.

Rare became one of the premier developers in the world, with sales averaging 1.4 million units per title and has sold nearly 90 million games since the company was founded. Five of the top-20 all-time-best-selling N64 titles were developed by Rare, including *007: GoldenEye*, the second-best-selling game in North America, with worldwide sales topping eight million. All Microsoft needs to do now is buy Enix and release the next *Dragon Quest* for Xbox, forcing seven million Japanese gamers to purchase an Xbox! The humanity!

As for Nintendo, the smart money is on them acquiring Treasure (currently developing *Wario Land*) and repeating the process. **play**

Mode 7

by Gabe Swarr

The Gamecube doesn't even have light gun games yet!
It does now!
I just never knew anyone who liked the RUMBLE FEATURE as much as you do!
...and there's nothing wrong with that!
You expect me to play that?!!

THE KID
The Kid is the youngest, most impressionable one in the group. He loves to play to have fun. All the members of *Mode 7* try to win him over with their opinions and views of the games they like.

DEATH MANIA
Death Mania loves games in which you can murder everyone and watch as their blood sprays across the screen. The rest of *Mode 7* is genuinely scared of him because he'd rather die before putting down the light gun in his hand.

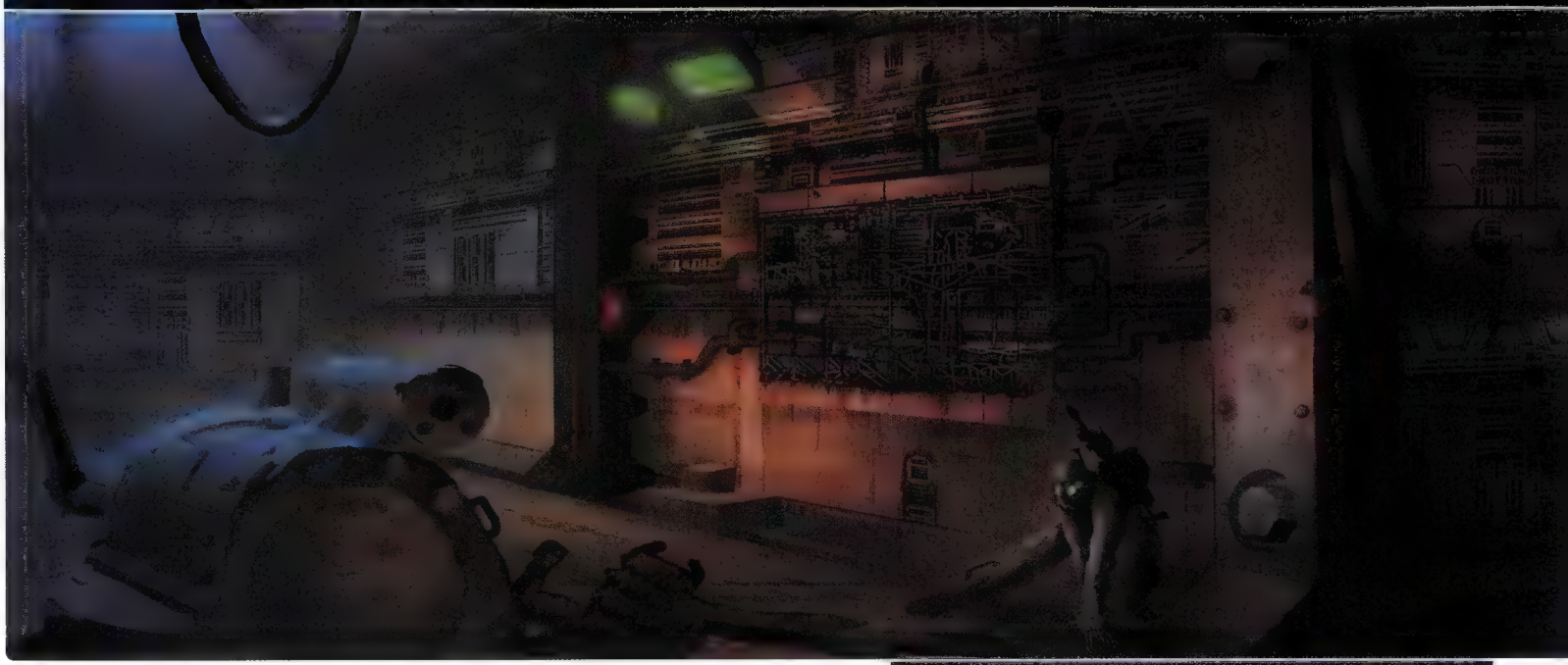
PEACHES
Mode 7 used to question Peaches' taste in games. He loves the *Mary Kate and Ashley* and *Barbie* games, and loves to "work" and "sweat" to dancing games. Though, once they found out that Judy Garland was his favorite actress, it all made some strange sense after that.

YOKOMOTO
Yokomoto is a Japanese kid who is a videogame genius, and loves to flaunt his abilities. He so amazing, he can beat *Earthworm Jim* blindfolded using only his feet on the controller. He is always in the know about new videogames from Japan -- not because he reads about them online or might know somebody there -- it's just because he's Japanese.

BUSHNELL
Bushnell is a hardcore, old-school videogame nerd. He loves classic games and bullies others that don't agree with him. He even collects old videogame pamphlets, magazine ads, and even consoles from the 70s. The pride of his collection is the *Channel F.*

GHOSTLY PROPORTIONS

Blizzard makes their long-awaited return to the fertile console market with the epic-in-the-making *StarCraft: Ghost*

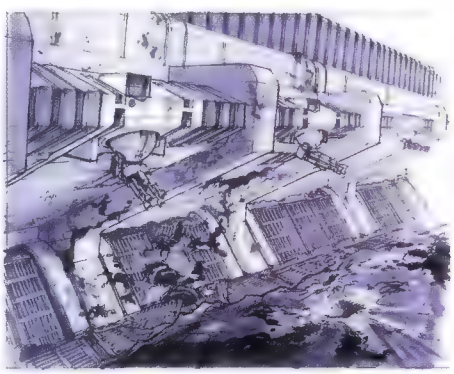


Absent on the console front since the mid-'90s (not counting their N64 *StarCraft* port), Blizzard Entertainment is returning in a big way—and for good measure, with a limber female heroine to boot.

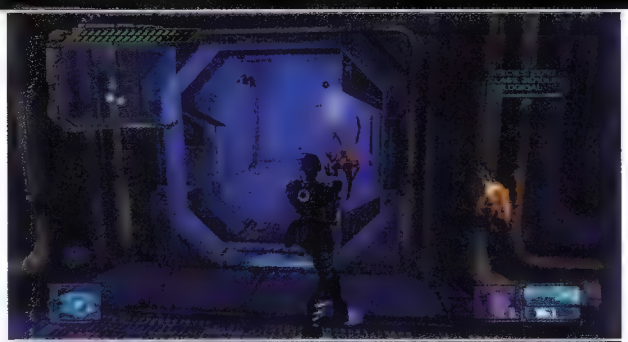
In *StarCraft: Ghost*, the publisher (here, matching wits with co-developer Nihilistic) continues the legacy of their real-time strategy franchise in a completely 3D perspective—and contrary to early speculation, the gameplay design is in proper form. Slipping on some techno-tactical gear, players will take on the guise of Nova, an expert in the art of espionage, infiltration and all-around combat. But rather than focus strictly on stealthy insertions, *Ghost* (named after the cloaking units from the original *StarCraft*) will pay homage to its RTS roots with some epic, battlefield clashes (with countless assault units to behold). However, as quick as Blizzard was to hype the vastness of the "theater of war" sequences, they've yet to lift the curtain on even *one* screenshot. Instead, we've only been given a surface level look at Nova's catalog of features—her registry of maneuvers, both stylish and practical; her wicked semblance of psionic powers, a result of her evolved human framework; her assortment of gear, from lightweight explosives to cloaking device; and her high poly-count model, teaming with an extraordinary neon glow on her sleekly designed, ever-agile "hostile environment suit."

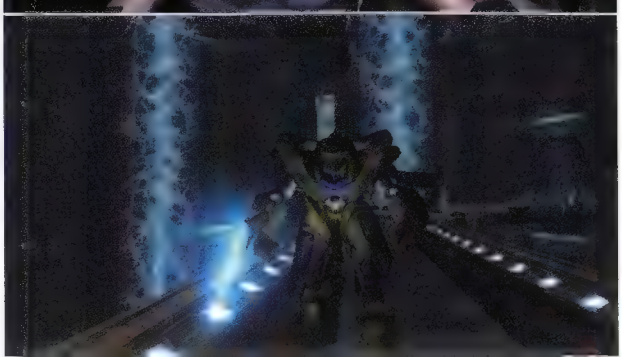
"Our roots are based in console gaming," Mike Morhaime, Blizzard president and co-founder, said excitedly, referring to the publisher's near-forgotten—but extremely taut—past console effects like *Blackthorne*, *The Lost Vikings* and *Rock 'n' Roll Racing*. "We're very excited about returning to the *StarCraft* series, and we look forward to developing this universe for the next-generation console systems."

With a street date set just about one year from now—hitting in late 2003 for PS2, Xbox and GameCube—*Ghost*'s extremely early demo already looks sharper than most other third-person actioniers currently *on* store shelves. Blizzard's vision for this title is tremendous; and with their "no excuses" reputation of striving for excellence, the game may very well exceed all expectations. **play**



Just a tease of those massively intricate, considerably epic environments that Blizzard promises.





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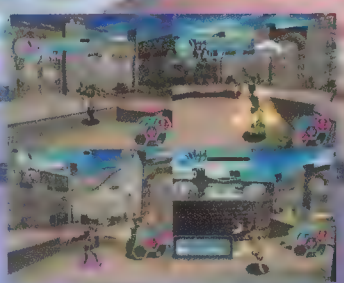

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BLOOD VIOLENCE

DOLBY SURROUND PRO LOGIC II

SONIC TEAM

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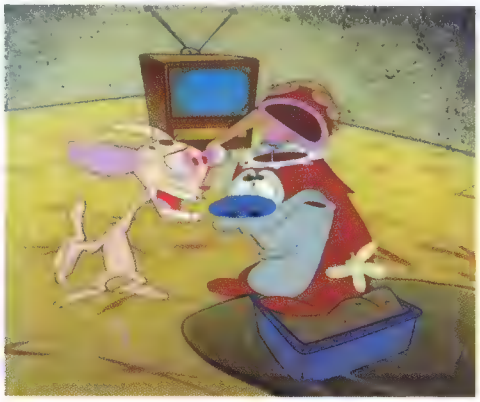
TITILATING 'TOONS

After the major networks have all but abandoned primetime animation, The New TNN offers up a block of edgy, adult-themed hjinks.

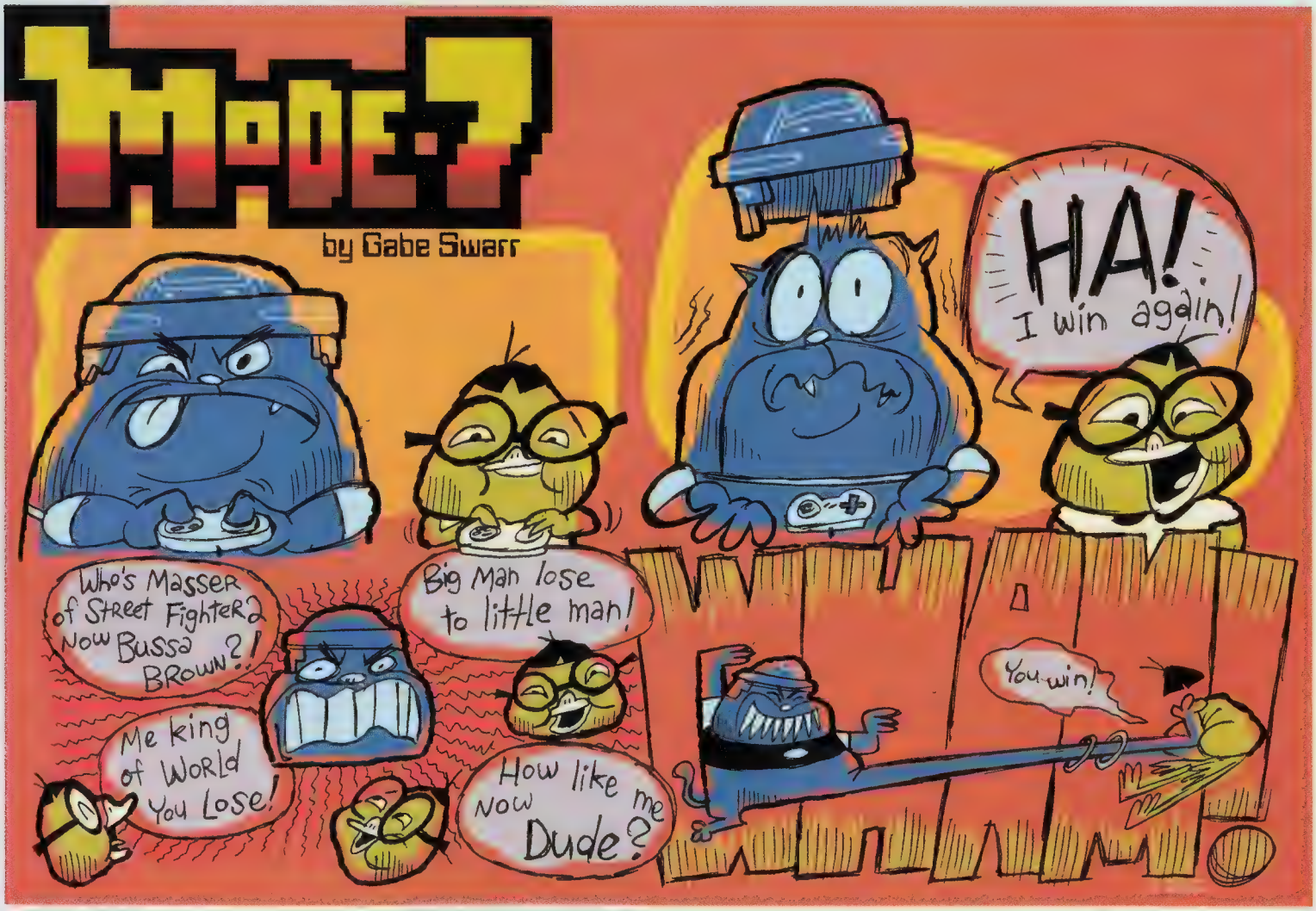
Following the lead of Cartoon Network's über-popular Adult Swim block, The New TNN has ordered a hefty dose of animation—but don't expect to get a "Rell-row Raggy" greeting from this batch of toons.

Enter *The Ren & Stimpy Show*, the long-overdue return of that notorious Chihuahua and his feline pal. John Kricfalusi, the show's original creator, will helm the duo's comeback, which is currently slated for a six-episode run. But without network censors hovering over their every move, the Spumco animation studio promises the most over-the-top *Ren & Stimpy* gags to ever be drawn. Other top talent will headline TNN's animation project, too, including Kelsey Grammer (voicing an unscrupulous-attorney-turned-rodent in *Gary the Rat*), Stan Lee (producing *Stripperella*, featuring *V.I.P.* bombshell Pamela Anderson as an exotic dancer by night and superhero by later that night), studio Klasky Csupo (animating *The Immigrants*, about two men—a Russian and a Mexican—who chase the American dream in the heart of trashy Hollywood, USA), and Ed Weinberger (writing and producing the tale of a 21st Century Archie Bunker-type who struggles to understand his dysfunctional family—his lesbian daughter, clergyman son, and Asian foster child).

It's obvious that this edgy collective of animation, premiering in early 2003, isn't your grandfather's *Steamboat Willie*. Let the tooning begin!



(From left) The newly revived *Ren & Stimpy*; Pamela Anderson as *Stripperella*.


Mode 7
by Gabe Swarr
HA! I win again!
Who's Masser of Street Fighter 2 Now Bussa BROWN?!
Big Man lose to little man!
You win!
Me king of World You Lose!
How like me Now Dude?

SPOOKY TALES OF TERROR THAT WILL MAKE YOU SHIVER!

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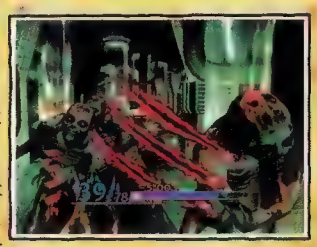
AIM FOR THEIR HEADS.



RELOAD!

MATURE M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore Violence

Wm Stout 2002

THE HORROR RETURNS!

SEGA

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CREAMPUFF STARDOM

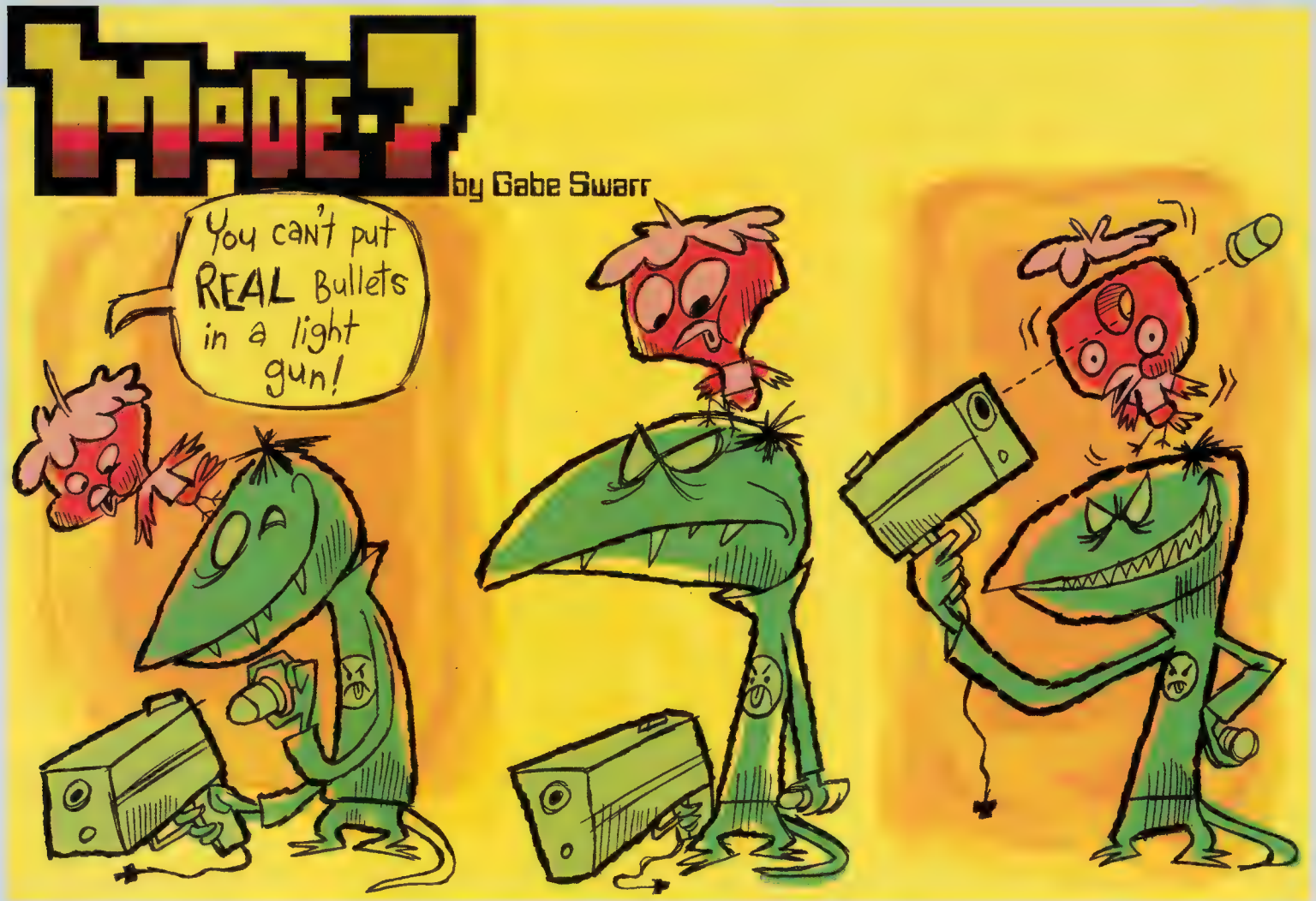
Nintendo is thinking pink. In an attempt to mimic the prosperity of the *Pokémon* franchise, the Big Three publisher is investing $10 million into that cuddly, cute creampuff named Kirby. Beginning with the Saturday morning Fox Box cartoon, *Kirby: Right Back At Ya!*, the branding campaign will also see the videogame icon turned into fast food toys, comic books, home videos, and a slew of other licensed merchandise. More games, too: *Kirby: Nightmare in Dream Land* (GBA) debuts this December; and a GameCube is already under development.

DID HELL FREEZE OVER?

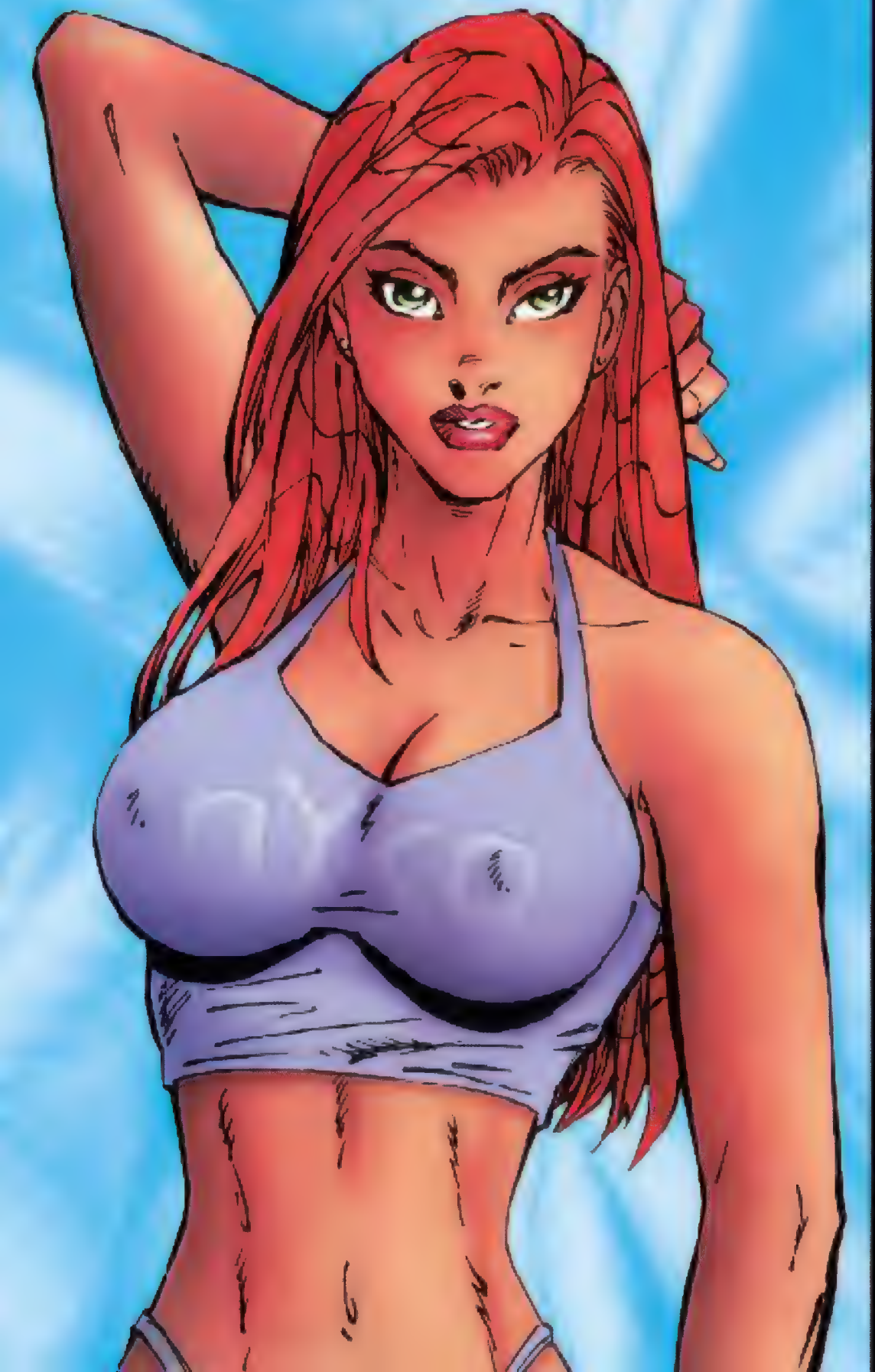
The highly-anticipated RPG [redacted], meaning the first big turn-based RPG on the Nintendo GameCube is from Sega... The second game in the franchise, [redacted], chronicling the back story of the game's main characters; and, most importantly, has a refined battle system. One of the best RPGs of the decade, the original game was plagued by a single, game-breaking flaw—turn-based battles that took forever to load, leading to hours of frustration with fights taking place every few seconds. Everything else about *Skies* was epic, so [redacted]

TARANTINO: THE GAME?

[redacted] ~with production rolling in both China and the U.S — [redacted] a development division of Vivendi Universal.
The movie will hits in October 2003; the game: Spring 2004.



ARE YOU COOL ENOUGH?



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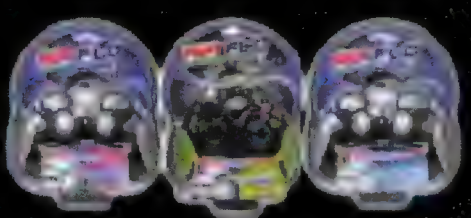

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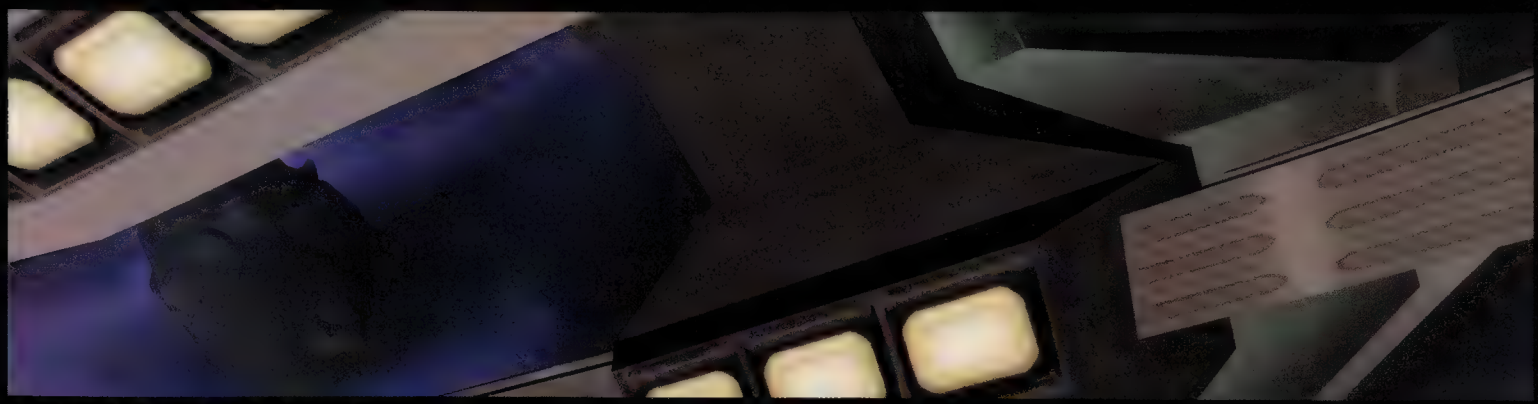
play games

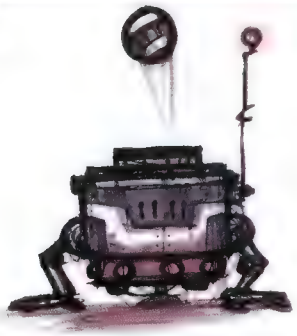
majesco/terminal reality's ***bloodrayne***

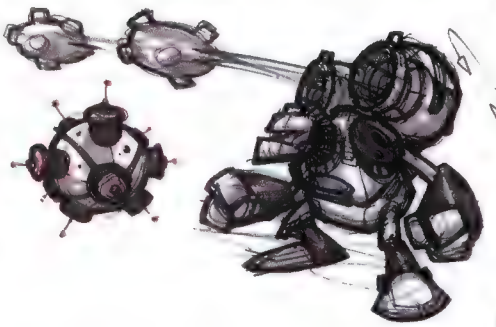


Action and adventure of the highest order

RATCHET & CLANK

words brady fiechter





Kids know something that adults sometimes don't: the joy of a pure imagination, an undiluted innocence that frees the mind for complete release into a place of fantasy. There is no worry or pretense, no judgement or guarded maturity, merely the ability to break away from the outside world and see the treasures living in the imaginary world. We all have that kid inside of us, it's just that some of us discover it more often than others, allowing it to blossom and enrich our lives.

We don't have to be a kid to play videogames, but videogames, perhaps more than any art form, effortlessly entice that child to the surface. Where else can we go to find a world, completely poured out of the minds of craftsmen who are dreamers like us, and play there, explore there, converse and find conflict there?

I believe the best games, the games that immerse and excite as much as entertain through familiar actions, are those that feed off rich story and presentation while, of course, maintaining the foundation of classic gameplay sensibilities. The world environment is so important, where enormous, dense 3D spaces are free for us to explore, and there is a growing connection to everything that is happening.

When Insomniac set out to create *Ratchet & Clank*, one of the first things the team talked about was how focused they were on building this "world environment," weaving their action and imagery and characters into an uncommonly cohesive, organic union. The result is meant to elevate the experience, to reveal new possibilities in the effect of traditional game design. The final result is a wonderful achievement, a game full of colorful invention, an example of game-makers at the peak of their craft.

A child-like energy indeed flows throughout the game, just as it did in Insomniac's accomplished *Spyro the Dragon* franchise. The conflict is menacing and the action constant, and the enemies may be fierce, but even their loopy, chubby designs match the casually cheerful quality that pervades *Ratchet & Clank*.

Every game must have a villain, and this time we're faced with the malevolent intentions of Chairman Drek, who has serious, serious issues as a competent evildoer. Drek wants to rule the galaxy and turn everything into a soulless, robotic community, but fortunately for the galaxy, there's the dreamer mechanic and hero Ratchet. And the endearing Clank, the pint-sized robot who is discovered in a trash heap after escaping from one of Drek's factories.

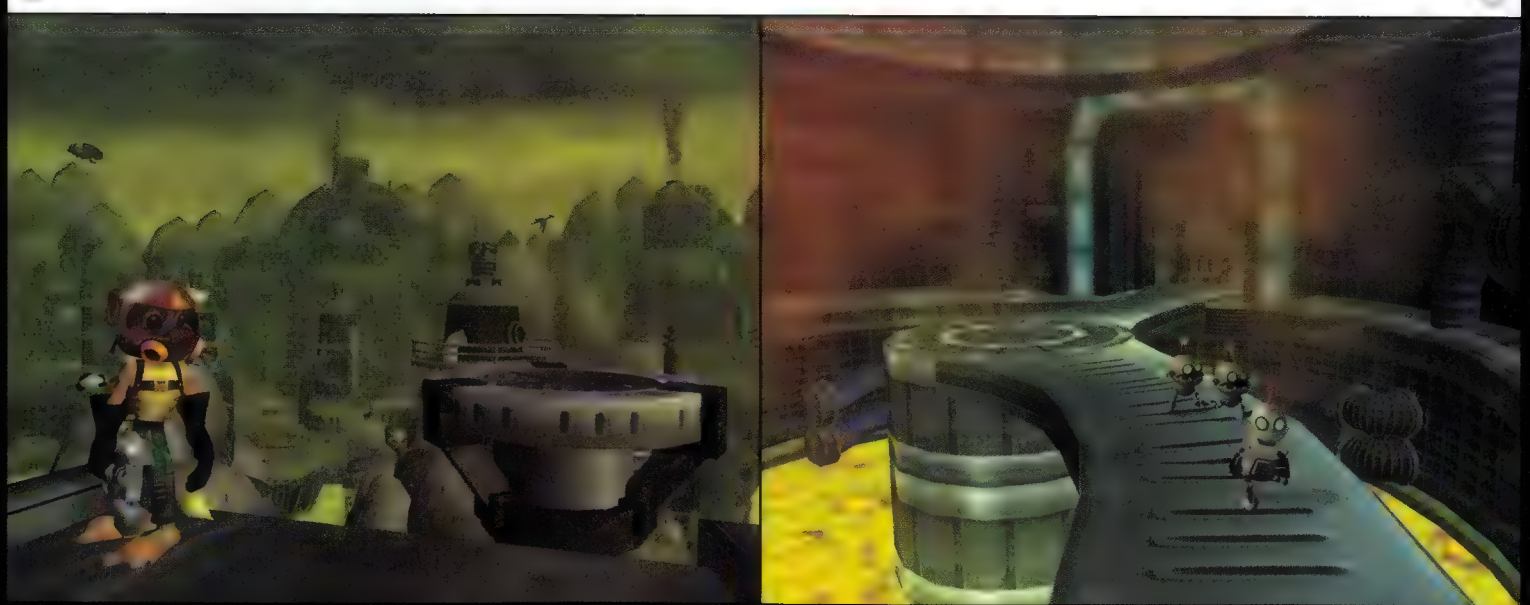
Together, Ratchet and Clank travel on spaceships to several dazzling planets, where all sorts of nastiness is going down. A huge assortment of weapons and gadgets are scattered throughout the 18 massive areas, either to be purchased or earned. Currency exists in the form of bolts, which spew out of the fallen enemies and countless boxes that can be destroyed. One of the game's big, classic pleasures is the satisfaction that exists in sucking up the thousands of bolts, trading them in for such beauties as the 30,000-bolt Tesla Claw, a devastating device that throws bolts of energy at the enemy and makes you very pleased that you no longer have to be on the receiving end of the torture. Other cool weapons include the explosive devastation of the Devastator and the satisfying spread of the flame thrower, and if you have the dedication to save the intimidating 150,000 bolts

"Kids know something that adults sometimes don't: the joy of a pure imagination..."

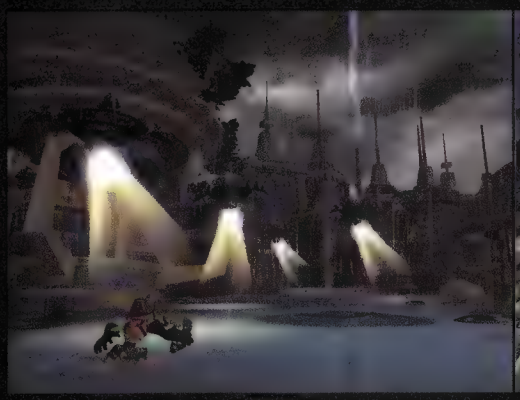
for the RYNO (Rip You a New One)—mass destruction is in your hands.

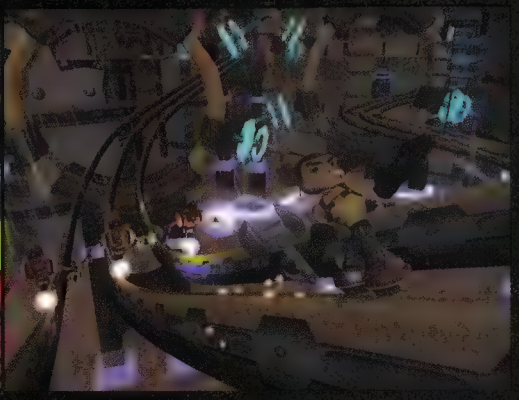
Through an intuitive and effortless menu system, any number of weapons and gadgets can be used to dominate the area you're in, which gives the game an unusual level of customization. I found myself using almost every item in my inventory at some point, never feeling like I was confined to relying on a single mode of play. The game is rife with variety and complexities, and the worlds are enormous and so full of extras that you feel compelled to unearth it all, if only to see what surprises await.

As the game opens, Ratchet and Clank begin with nothing but their newfound friendship and a wrench, but almost immediately Clank is upgraded with a helicopter blade, which can be deployed as he straddles Ratchet's back. This entertaining dynamic becomes the centerpiece to the platforming, which is always just challenging enough to keep you on your toes. The balance between hazardous exploration and enemy



The game has absolutely gorgeous worlds filled with clever enemies and engaging tasks.





shoot-outs is right on, keeping you constantly engaged in some clever way. Whether you're gliding with the swing-shot, racing on a hoverboard, dashing with the rocket pack, laying explosives with the mine glove or blasting ahead with the blaster, the experience is constantly on a thrilling high.

Once Ratchet finds a gas mask and can breathe on gaseous planets, the coolest, most invigorating moments in the game begin to come in droves: grinding at breakneck speeds with the grind boots on massive networks of pipes and beams, winding through space and around towers and ships. Strapping on the magnet boots to crawl on the ceilings as your entire view shifts and moves, giving you an awesome sensation of space and dimension. Clanks' transformation into a... Nope, that little moment of devastating charm is for you to discover.

There are aspects to *Ratchet & Clank* that draw from the best, most traditional forms of good game design, but there are also those amazing elements that feel entirely fresh, new and exhilarating, handled with skill and elegance. I absolutely loved the little bot creatures, which spread out in teams and attack the target as Ratchet and Clank observe the destruction from a safe distance. Like so much of the game, the way the animation, sound, and visual presence is staged to complete the actual gameplay task is spectacular.

So sophisticated and full of movement are the worlds you explore, it's natural to call *Ratchet & Clank* a technical triumph. But what truly dazzles the eyes is how artfully Insomniac has splashed color, texture and life onto the technical marvel of the game. Big technology and sci-fi mechanisms become its dominating style of a future world that exists as a bright, violent cartoon. Everything is painted in rich colors of purples, greens, blues, and gray metallics. The whole look of the game is endlessly inventive, rewarding the gamer who admires the extra touches most designers seem to disregard.

Credit must also be given to the way each area is structured, never feeling overwhelming or convoluted in the slightest. There is a good amount of moving back and forth between the planets, but not once was I frustrated, feeling like the game was being artificially lengthened. Instead of feeling held up and punished for having to retrace steps, I was more drawn to the events of the game, feeling a sense of total belonging to the reality of the story. And the levels are designed in a way that you are often soaking in large expanses of territory, seeing where you've been and where you might be going next.

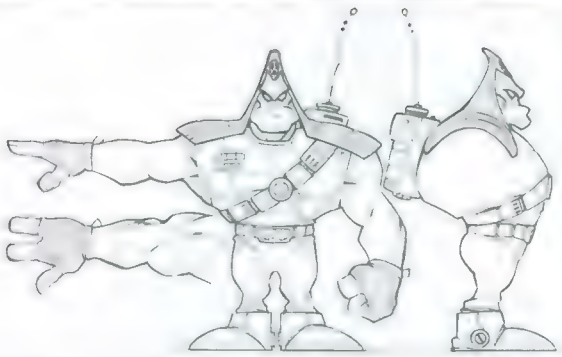
The creatures that populate this enormous, diverse galaxy make complete sense within their settings, carrying the same fantastic tone and flavor. Most of the resistance is of the artificial type, animated gorgeously and impressively expressive up close and personal. Dialogue with the many life forms is voiced superbly, lending added credence and enjoyment to the simplistic story. There are a few surprises along the way and plenty of laughs from the occasionally coy, self-effacing writing and visual gags, especially during the amusing cut-scenes.

Ratchet and Clank took an extraordinarily short 18 months to go from conception to your PlayStation 2. Play this marvelous game and you'll be willing to wait twice that long for a sequel.

Insomniac interview ➡

nuts 'n' bolts

Ted Price, president of Insomniac, talks about the future, the past, the importance of a top-tier crew of designers, and what it takes to make a Ratchet and Clank.



So is this where all adventure games need to go? I'm starting to really get into cinematic games.
We weren't the first to do it. *ICO* was an excellent example of a game that had cinematic qualities and had a story that really wasn't all that verbal, not a lot of dialogue, and everything was integrated really well. Unfortunately, the game didn't do that well. But certainly we weren't the first ones to do it.

I like visual storytelling; the game is a story, in a way. *Ratchet & Clank* goes towards this. Maybe this is the way it should be done from now on.
When we set out to do it, that wasn't our goal. [Ultimately, we wanted] to create a game that was different, but not necessarily that was the first to do something special. Our intention was to take the genre and broaden it. That's why we took elements from RPGs, adventure games, and shooters. We felt as though we had done a pretty good job of taking character action games to a certain point with *Spryo*, and when we were discussing this game at the very beginning, the question was, "Where can we go now?" What is it that we can do that is more interesting and maybe more revolutionary, and if people see this as a revolutionary game, or game that was the first to do certain things, fantastic. But it was more about our desire to do something different.

What were some of the biggest challenges or unpleasant surprises?
Well, I think one of the biggest challenges we had was realizing what we could pull off with the time we had. With the PS2, you have so much opportunity to create these massive worlds and characters that are really detailed that we were tempted just to go crazy—and we did. And some of our designs—some of the designs of the worlds—drove our artists absolutely nuts because they were too big. But we managed to spend the extra hours we needed to put them together. But that was probably the toughest part—dealing with designs that were just too big and trying to fit them into a development cycle that was fairly short. As far as at what we did differently on the design side, I think the challenges were making 35 different gadgets and weapons work in a balanced fashion. When you've got so many different weapons, it's really difficult to have each one be unique and not at the same time be, say, ultra powerful or unbalanced versus the other weapons. So balancing everything was a real challenge.

Yeah, must have been brutal with so many different scenarios to deal with.
But that's where prototyping came in. We did a lot of work at the beginning of the project. Make sure that all the weapons felt good and fun to use, and not overly powerful. They're all really powerful, but they're all fairly close to each other. The way we tuned that was ammo capacity and prices on weapons. The RYNO is...

A little overpriced.
Yes, *way* overpriced [*laughs*], but it's much more powerful and it unbalances the game, but as a result, because of that, we jacked the price way up. If you wanna spend the time making the bolts to get the RYNO, well, great. You're going to spend hours and hours trying to make that money. Yes, when you get the RYNO, it makes getting through the game much more easy, but you put the time in to make that happen. So this whole time-for-money thing became important. And that was one result—the RYNO and some of the other things you'll get that unbalances the game.

"Once we establish boundaries, we're always tempted to really push them." —president **Ted Price**

You say you want to always keep things fresh. What motivates, what keeps you constantly pushing forward?
This whole team is made up of people who love to be creative and push things. Every time we bring someone on, we make sure it's someone who's interested in contributing to design. On *Spyro*, we had a taste of success and a taste of being able to do something that was different within the genre. Once people realize we're in a position to do things a little bit differently, it's kind of like... it keeps you coming back, we have this team and this publisher, supports these crazy things we're doing, and when they start working it's a little bit addictive. You want to keep pushing and pushing and pushing. It's so much fun to see people playing your game and saying, "Wow." Or those who appreciate the unique qualities of your designs; that's what keeps people here motivated.

And there is an obvious love for the craft.
You know what, we're very lucky to be in this position. If we weren't, if we hadn't [achieved] such success with *Spyro* and done a good job with *Disruptor*, we probably wouldn't have the luxury to experiment. We might be doing licenses racing games, or fighting games. We like working in a genre that's a little bit more constrained. We're very fortunate to have this opportunity, and a lot of that is working with Sony and having their support. They're very autonomous. They let us come up with designs; they may make suggestions, but they don't force us one way or the other. It's just a fantastic relationship. And the result is a game like *Ratchet & Clank*, where we have been able to explore the boundaries of the genre and kind of push them out a bit.

You talk of innovation and doing things differently... experimenting. Can you key in on one area you are most focused on—where you have taken a different approach?
Sure, putting an RPG-esque inventory in a game with more of a mascot, more of an action-platformer aspect, and you're not sure if the audience is going to catch on. Are they really going to get it? Is it too complicated? When you put it on paper, a publisher might be a bit wary of endorsing a design like that, but Sony gives us the leeway to experiment with ideas such as that. Or maybe just putting as many weapons as we did in this game, if I were looking at a design like this on paper, there's no way you're going to get the balance; the player might be so confused with the weapon choices, and we're just not able to try it out.

It's unfortunate that more developers don't have that luxury. Maybe you're forging the way. You do the best you can with your game and

see what happens.
I think another thing that prevents people from doing it is that it is so difficult—the risk of failure is really high when you do push it. There's no guarantee that the audience—the general consumer audience—is going to jump on board with your ideas. There have been examples of games that are ahead of the times, or too sophisticated for audiences, but they just didn't have the right timing. But that's a risk you take: Are people going to get it?

You've said you sometimes maybe push almost *too* far. Is there anything you can point at and say, "Wow, if we only had more time," or, "I wish we could have gotten that in there"?
On *Spyro*, I think I could have said that. There were more mini-games we wanted to put, in, say, *Spyro 2*, but with this game, we are very satisfied what we ended up with in the game, and what we're excited about is that about 90 percent of the original design showed up in the game.

Sounds like you had the foresight, that you were smart enough to sit down and say, "Realistically, I can achieve this, and will."
It was actually a lesson learned the hard way. Before we started *Ratchet & Clank*, we were working on a nebulous PS2 project, and we figured out the hard way. You make these assumptions about gameplay, and build levels around them, and the levels don't work. We gotta make sure at the very basic level that the gameplay works, it's fun, and it's something that, technically, we can pull off. With *Ratchet & Clank*, we started with that philosophy from the very beginning: let's make sure we prototype everything, that way, when levels go into production, we're not taking huge pieces of levels and throwing them out or building characters that aren't going to be used. So that was absolutely key. I think Mark [Cerny, president of Cerny Games] had been pushing that for a long time. But it was a philosophy we all developed together. It evolved as we created *Spyro*.

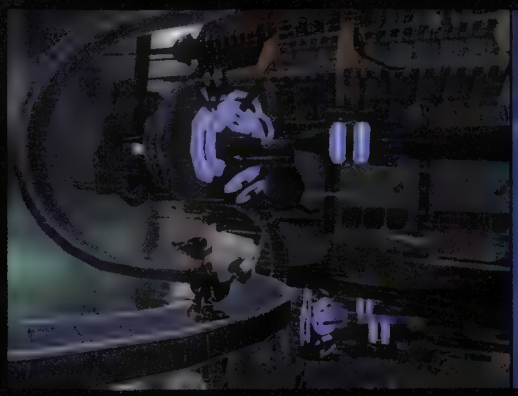
How much has your approach to game design changed?
Our approach changes on everything we do. Every game we do is different as well. Even the *Spyro* sequels were all different from the other. We learn efficiency. I think on the next game we do, we're going to save even more time in pre-production by building on the prototype lessons we've learned on *Ratchet*. This project was an 18-month project. All the credit goes to the guys here who have been working their asses off. Everyone works very efficiently. We brought in a group of professionals who do not screw around and who know what it means to meet deadlines. It's one thing we've always done—meet deadlines—because it's key for Sony and for our own morale to say when we're going to do something by a certain date, we will. It helps with people's work ethic and attitude.

At what point did you decide to continue with the character-driven genre. Did you ever think, "Let's do something completely different?"
We certainly discussed that after *Spyro*; that was the most difficult time we had on the heels of *Spyro 3*, which was a very successful game. We were looking at each other and saying, "What do we do now?" We got the PS2, which is a very powerful machine, and we've got Sony's support, and we need to come up with something that was as big a hit as *Spyro*, but do we really want to do a character-action game again? Maybe we should think about other directions, and we did—we tried some stuff. But when it came down to it, the team was built around the love of character-action games, and everyone here has real expertise in creating those games—where it's 3D camera control, game design for open spaces, character design for humorous games. Everyone here has built their skill-set around character-action games; we came back to it because we realized this is our strength. But what's really cool: We were able to go in a different direction. It wasn't that we had to abandon the genre, or that we were doing exactly the same thing; we were able to bring in other elements and expand our own skills-set from taking pages from RPGs, adventures and shooters. As a result, everybody here has really grown in their talents.

When you're locked in, it's certainly hard to find time to see what everyone else is doing. You have to say sharp.
Yeah, we all play games. Guaranteed, we'll be playing all the action platformers coming out this holiday. You name it—anything comes out—we're playing it.

A good game is a good game. I think you should compete against all genres and make the best thing you can. If it's a great game, it's a great game.
One of the things we hope will happen when people find all the secrets and see how the game continues to provide enjoyment after you resolve the story, we hope that that's going to bring more people into the *Ratchet & Clank* universe. Because there is a lot to do, outside the main stories, that was one of our goals—to really make this game deep and provide a lot of extras.

The storytelling in the game really adds dimension and character. And it's the right balance—it's not excessive.
We had a really good time coming up with the characters, creating goofy dialogue. John Lally and Oliver Laid, who came up with the story, are very funny people, and when Oliver showed us



the scripts, we were very pleasantly surprised and we would burst out laughing. After actually seeing the cinematic—after they've been animated—I can watch them over and over. We made a conscious effort to make them a little more adult this time. We learned a lot about how to write a better story on this project. It took us three *Spyros* to really get a story that I think [really worked]. *Ratchet & Clank* is the result of all of us maturing as storytellers and that

"We learned a lot about how to write a better story on this project." – president Ted Price

because we were able to tell a very decent story, early on we made sure it integrated the gameplay.

What was one of the biggest technical hurdles to bring this all together.

[illegible] aries, we're always tempted to really [illegible] put too much into the levels. We create cities that have too many polys or effects that are too CPU intensive, and we have to scale back. Or we become more efficient. That's a constant challenge for us. We're discovering new ways to push the PS2.

For the next game, there are a lot of tools that Alex [Hastings, vice president of technology] is going to develop that the artist's are extremely excited about. It will make the game we do next shine even brighter. **play**

ratchet & clank

play rating

Nothing more to say. I love this game.

PS2 developer: **insomniac** / publisher: **sony** / available: **november 5**

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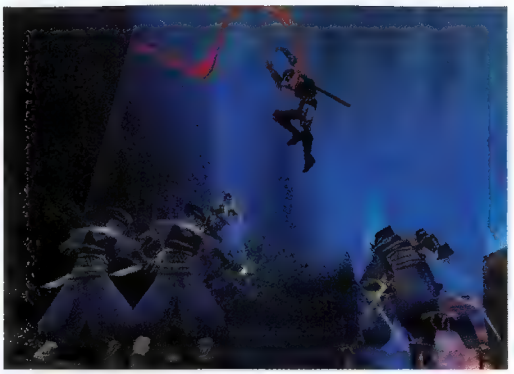
The quick makes 'em dead

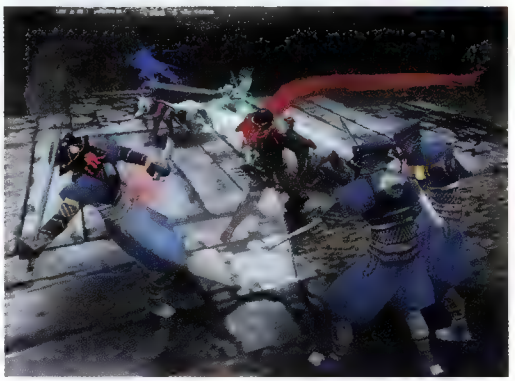
SHINOBI

words dave halverson

With the revival of any classic, it's presumed that because it incubated so long, it should be groundbreaking. But in *Shinobi*'s case—a game that has taken ten years to resurface—the gaming landscape has changed so drastically since its brand of 2D was popular, there's little to bring to the table from the originals, save for the namesake and a few trademarks that were indicative of just about every good game in the category at the time. *Ninja Gaiden* will face a similar restructuring in its new bid for resurgence. In *Shinobi*'s case, the original team has long disbanded and Yuzo Koshiro, the man who composed the music that really made *Shinobi Shinobi*, is off somewhere raising a parrot. The team working on the new *Shinobi* for PS2 at Overworks is taking the spirit of the original and building a new 3D adventure around it. The good news is that they have molded their lead ninja so well, he's practically worth the price of admission alone; the not-so-good news is that the level design and structure is highly simplistic geometrically, and in terms of technology (outside of the lead character, Hotsuma), the game looks slightly dated. At this point, I won't even mention the American dub, except to say I pray it's placeholder. Hotsuma talks like Clark Kent; my cheese factor gauge actually exploded.

Jan-Michael Vincent looks for somewhere to land... Bad choice.





"The character is so perfectly tuned and nimble, the game's like an action ballet."

All of that said, it seems a crime to have to write about *Shinobi* in this state, sans boss-balancing, final cut scenes, and some needed tweaking. Currently, if you have the right power-up element, the bosses die in one or so hits, while if you don't, they are criminally difficult. The gameplay itself, however, seems intact. The goal is to kill all of the floating spooks and enemies in each given area to open the barriers blocking your path, until it's boss time, plain and simple. Joy is derived by way of slicing multiple enemies in a row, and then watching as a brief dramatic camera angle depicts the lot of them falling into pieces-soaked arterial spray. This is one cool-ass tactic, but not one to hang the entire game on, which they gladly do not. The emphasis is placed (especially in the later levels) on wall running and platforming—you know, *Shinobi* stuff—so in terms of keeping it real, Overworks is filling the bill. The environments themselves aren't all that spectacular, but the character is so perfectly tuned and nimble, it makes no difference; the game plays perfectly, like an action ballet. In terms of control and intuitiveness, Hotsuma is perfection. The game's overall appeal will rely on how the final version plays in terms of boss-tuning and story integration, but knowing Sega these days, I'm not worried in the least. **play**

shinobi

PS2

developer: **sega overworks** / publisher: **sega** / available: **november**

Gaming's most legendary ninja is looking quite fantastic on PS2. Let's hope the game they're building around him measures up.

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Bizarre does Disney right

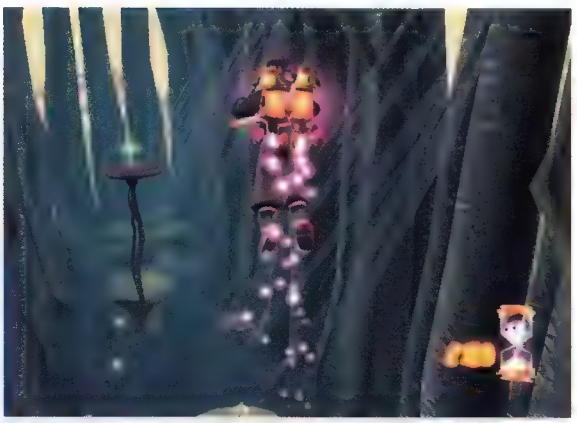
TREASURE PLANET

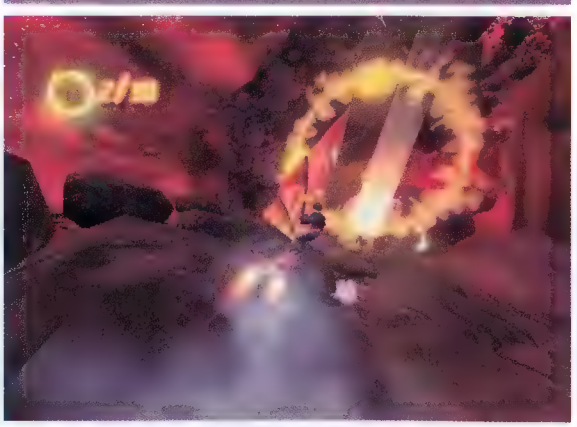
words dave halverson

Just when I thought November couldn't get any better, in drops the surprise game of the issue, a nearly complete version of *Treasure Planet* for the PS2 from none other than Bizarre Creations (*Project Gotham, Fur Fighters*... need I say more?). I love the way Disney does business. Why mess around with screenshots and press drivel when you can just wait until the game goes gold and drop it in FedEx? Not knowing what to expect, I was floored to find a *Jak and Daxter*-like feel (they're very different games, but the engine and color schemes are reminiscent), complimented by solar-surfing levels, where rather than send you off in a linear path Bizarre turns you loose in massive, free-roaming levels. If the film—a futuristic twist on Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*—is indicative of the game, this could be the best teen-to-adult fare to come out of Disney since *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.

You play as the film's lead (duh), Jim, with his pet protoplasmic companion, Morph (a sort of modern-day widget) by your side. The game's vast action regions—a glimmering assortment of futuristic mecha-pirate dominions such as spaceports, trade routes, pirate ships and even swamps—house beacons, which give Jim temporary abilities such as "cyborg arms" and "helping hands," time-sensitive items used to trigger events in different segments of each level, like platforms and doorways. This dynamic creates scenarios where platforming stints must be quickly negotiated in order to reach the designated target and either blow it up or turn it on. Aside from the ample and very nimble platforming, collecting doubloons and smashing an assortment of cleverly designed alien creatures and bots keeps you busy and, pretty much, wholly engulfed. Jim's rubbery animation and ultra-precise movements make for one very fun experience. Coupled with the solar-surfing levels (there are ten of each, making the game quite immense), the end product is the best Disney game since, oh, I'd have to say *Aladdin* or *Hercules*.

Of course, where you find Disney, you'll find celebrities who actually seem happy to work on properties outside the film, unlike a certain Spider-Man who sounded about as enthused as a used Yugo salesman in his game debut. Doing the honors for *Treasure Planet* we have Joseph Gordon-Levitt as Jim Hawkins, David Hyde Pierce as Dr. Doppler, Martin Short as B.E.N, and Emma Thompson as Captain Amelia. Pretty good company. *Treasure Planet* is as a must-own PS2 game. **play**





"Jim's rubbery animation and ultra-precise movements make for one *very* fun experience"

Free-roaming solar-surfing levels occupy about half of the game

Treasure Planet — preview

PS2

developer: **bizarre creations** / publisher: **sceа** / available: **november**

Bizarre Creations take their platforming skills and do the Disney thing, resulting in one of The Mouse's best games in yeras

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Attention to detail: Codemasters is going to great lengths to ensure realism. This is from a recording session to capture the in-car sound of the Dodge Viper.

Racing and role-playing meet head on

PRO RACE DRIVER

words dave halverson

"Everyone knows that Codemasters are masters of the craft."

What if there existed a racing/RPG with story elements akin to *Shenmue* and racing elements on par with the very best in the class? That's likely the question that CodeMasters posed before they put pedal to metal designing *Pro Race Driver: Days of Thunder*, *Driven*, and *Grand Prix* all rolled into one blazing racing adventure. The epitome of racing and role-playing, *PRD* begins with a gripping sienna-hued film—footage surrounding the events of an accident which years later would result in the fabric of this game, a compelling set-up brought off extremely well from the first frame. Interacting with your manager, sponsors, etc., the real-time models are shockingly realistic, with body hair (okay, it's gross but, hey, they made a texture), moles, facial animation, seamless features, and layered clothing all given the royal treatment, all the more exquisite given the genre. Later, between races, kickin' it in the garage, you have access to your e-mail, including personal business, event info, your crew chief for tuning specific to each course, and even job offers—should you be performing well enough to get any.

Once the racing begins, things get even tighter. Casing the LOLA World Championship circuit, the course design is diverse and first-rate with tracks ranging from fast and wide-open to ultra-tight and twisty. Everyone knows that Codemasters are masters of the craft, with games like *Colin McRae* and *Indy Racing League* under their belts, and their best is certainly on display here. Multiple views affording every taste, spot-on physics and splendid visuals on par with *Gran Turismo* accent races that exhibit keen AI and lush, fluid landscapes.

Always striving for their technological best, *PRD* also boasts standard-defining, real visible damage, created using the crash test industry's FEM system, which affects the handling and drivability of vehicles as the races wear on. This is the total package—the quintessential racing/RPG—so don't you dare miss it.

play

Pro Race Driver will hopefully spark a trend in the racing world of vid-games

pro race driver — preview

PS2

developer: **codemasters** / publisher: **codemasters** / available: **winter**

Between *Pro Race Driver* and *Colin McRae*, Codemasters has the holiday racing season pretty well wrapped up.

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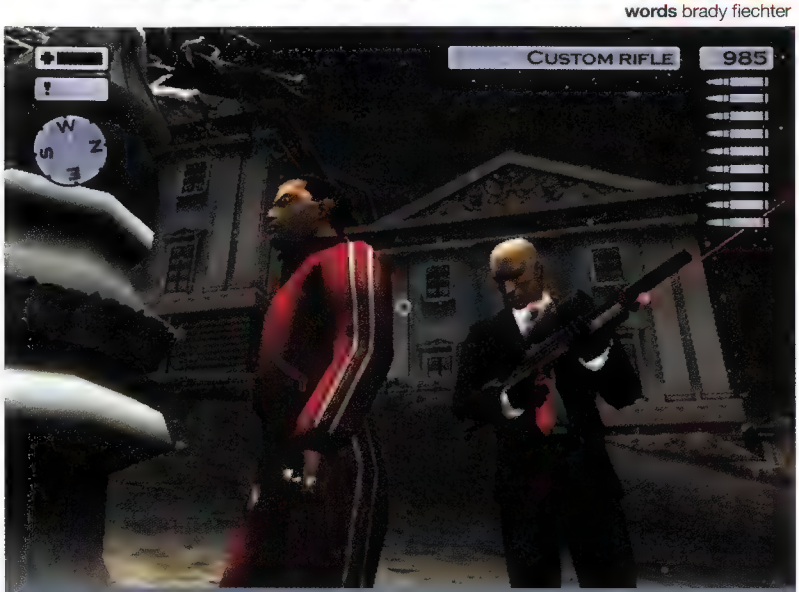
Honor and family, wine and guns, assassinations and good times

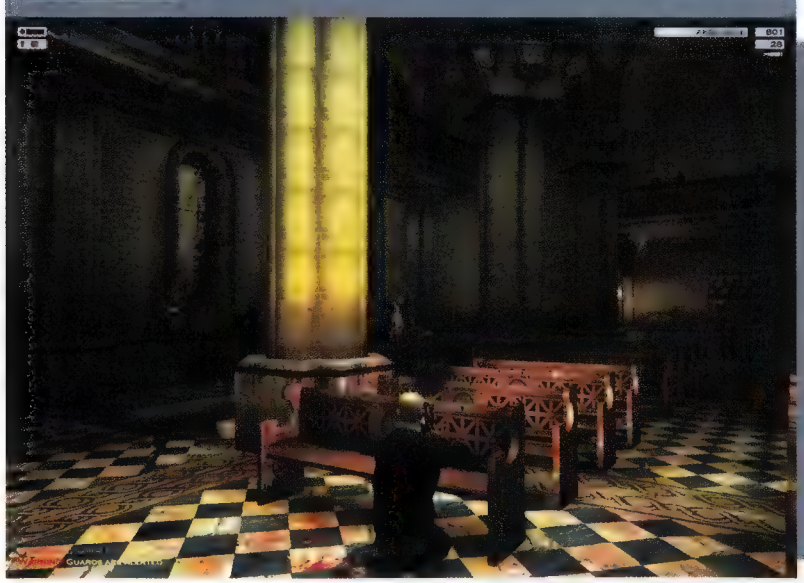
HITMAN 2

words brady fiechter



"Well-versed in the art of precision murder, he conceals plenty of firearms..."

The lighting and rich texturing bring a dense mood to the interesting settings.



47 is a hitman who desires to escape his regretful past, but when his friend and confidant Padre Vittorio is beaten and abducted, the past becomes a fiery weapon in the irascible 47's war for revenge and personalized justice. Well-versed in the art of precision murder, he conceals plenty of firearms and assorted hitman goodies that can either be used stealthily or with unchecked aggression. End result is the same: mafia boys dead, mission complete.

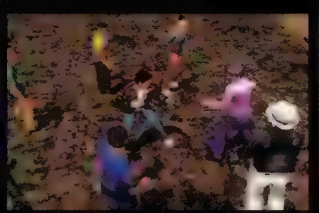
Hitman 2: Silent Assassin involves lots of travel, shooting, blood and violence, but a dense story is told to strengthen the game's pull, presented boldly and charged with cinematic flair. While it may initially strike as a typical action-adventure crime drama, the game begins to grow its appeal with a strong atmosphere and bold approach to its themes. The designers are going for an extensive scope and elegant underpinning to the grit. The art style alone carries an exceptional interest, but what really strikes me is the orchestrated score, performed elegantly by the Budapest Symphony Orchestra. Given that so few developers acknowledge or even recognize the immense contribution of orchestrated music, *Hitman 2* shows even more signs of vibrant life. **play**

hitman 2: silent assassin — preview

PS2 — developer: **io interactive** / publisher: **eidos** / available: **november**

With a depth of play, fantastic visual charge and a rich mood, *Hitman 2* takes its interactive crime drama to intriguing places.

Shenmue II



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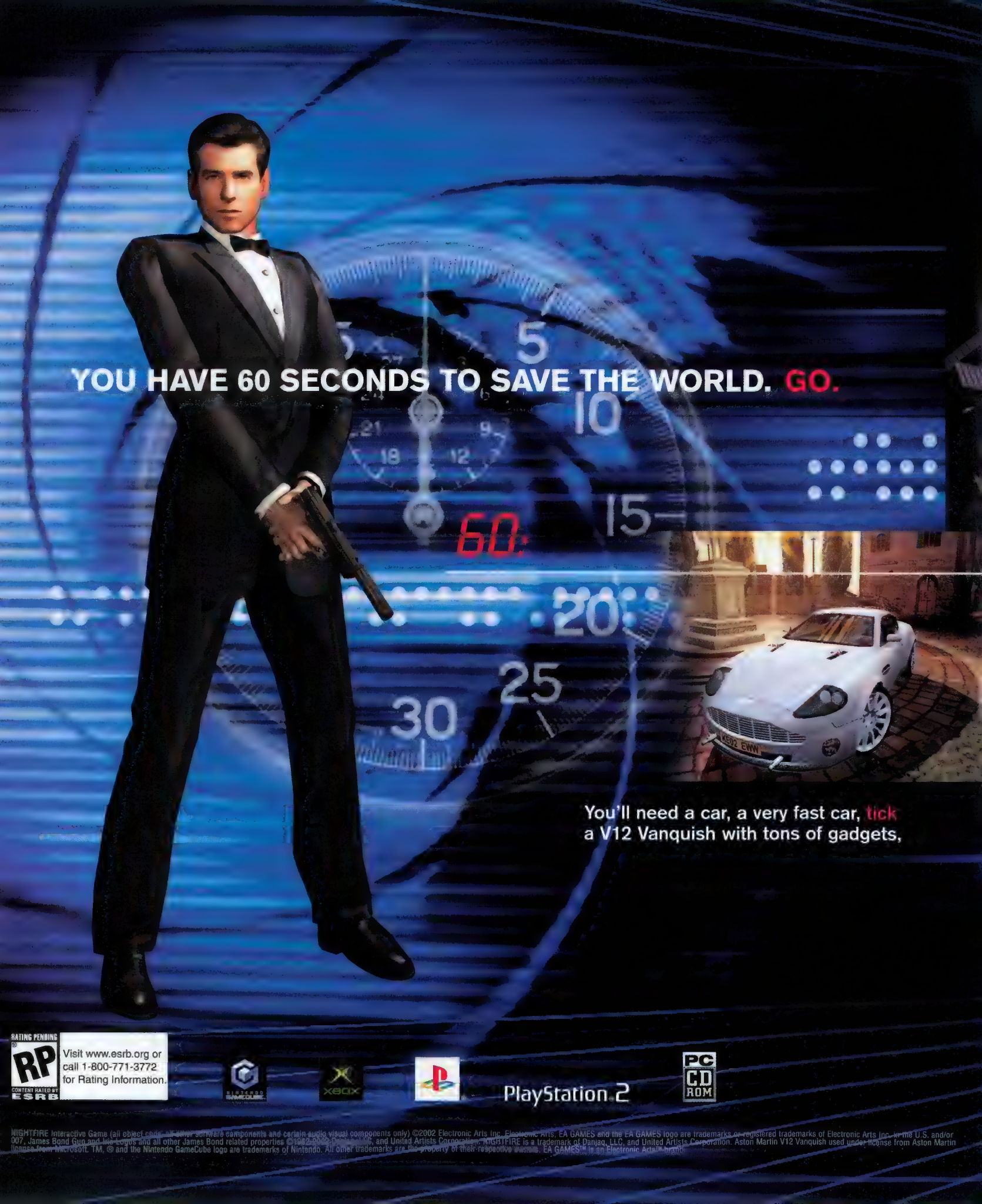
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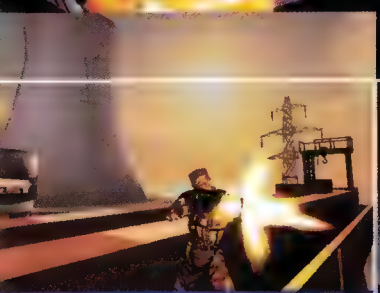
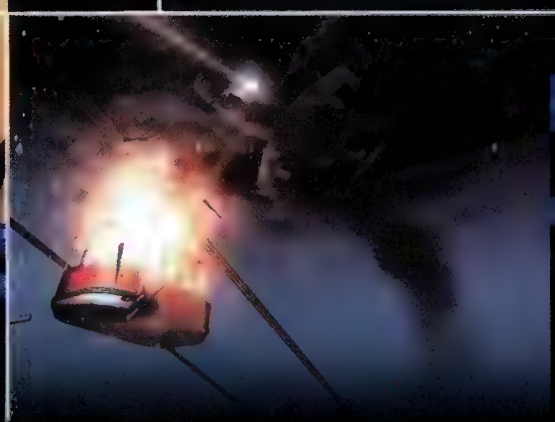
enough gadgets, tock to help you blow up a space station,
or jump out of a plane and tick stop a secret military force,
before breaking into Mayhew's estate,





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007.ea.com

or, engineering a rooftop escape from Phoenix International's Tokyo
office tock then exiting a burning gondola tick in the alps all in time
to rendezvous tock with secret agents Zoe and tick Dominique

but don't pat yourself on the back tock too much
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The *Bond* series hits again, all guns blazing

007: NIGHTFIRE

words brady fiechter

There have been countless videogames pulled from the wellspring of the Bond universe, but no series has hit the target like EA's 007 first-person shooters—which began, most rousingly, with the Nintendo 64 version of *007: The World is Not Enough*. Here was a game that came quietly, toward the end of the N64's run, with no hype and no expectations. The result was one of the best console FPS games of its time, a classically designed, skillfully crafted escape into the action-soaked world of James Bond—cool Q-Lab gadgets, frantic snow-ski chases, gondola shootouts and endless terrorist massacres. So keenly built were these visually diverse, convincingly atmospheric levels that the action seemed almost fresh and new, despite its familiar, duck-and-shoot tactics.

Back then, we got to enjoy Electronic Arts' support for "...advanced graphics and visual effects" and "...3D cinematics with full speech." Thrilling stuff then, but not really to mention, because the 32-year-old systems were wearing thin, and too few cared much about yet another last-run console FPS. But then the series really took off, catapulted by the new wave of technology of a still-red-hot genre, and ended up bringing its awesome brand of back-cool firepower to the Xbox and PS2 with *Agent Under Fire*. That the series became a genuine powerhouse was a welcome surprise—same great design, same engaging ideas, but now the technology of new hardware cracked the door to a newer, richer Bond aesthetic. Like *The World is Not Enough*, the game rocked, offering in-your-face action of a perfectly pitched, super-charged pace, executed with an uncommon understanding of object and enemy placement. Vehicles, even, were finally worked into the dominating first person action. BMWs, skiing and snowmobiling were now part of the boiling recipe, and the game showed signs of breaking out into much broader territory.

That's where the next sequel comes into play, and franchise status is in tow. *NightFire* is up next, and even Pierce Brosnan's likeness has been tapped to turn the slick, loosely themed 007 hunting grounds into a more convincing virtual realization of the film franchise. Before *NightFire* is judged as a worthy successor, interested players should take a look back and warm up with the most underrated set of FPS games out there. **play**

Agent Under Fire looked good, but this blistering sequel cranks it up a notch.

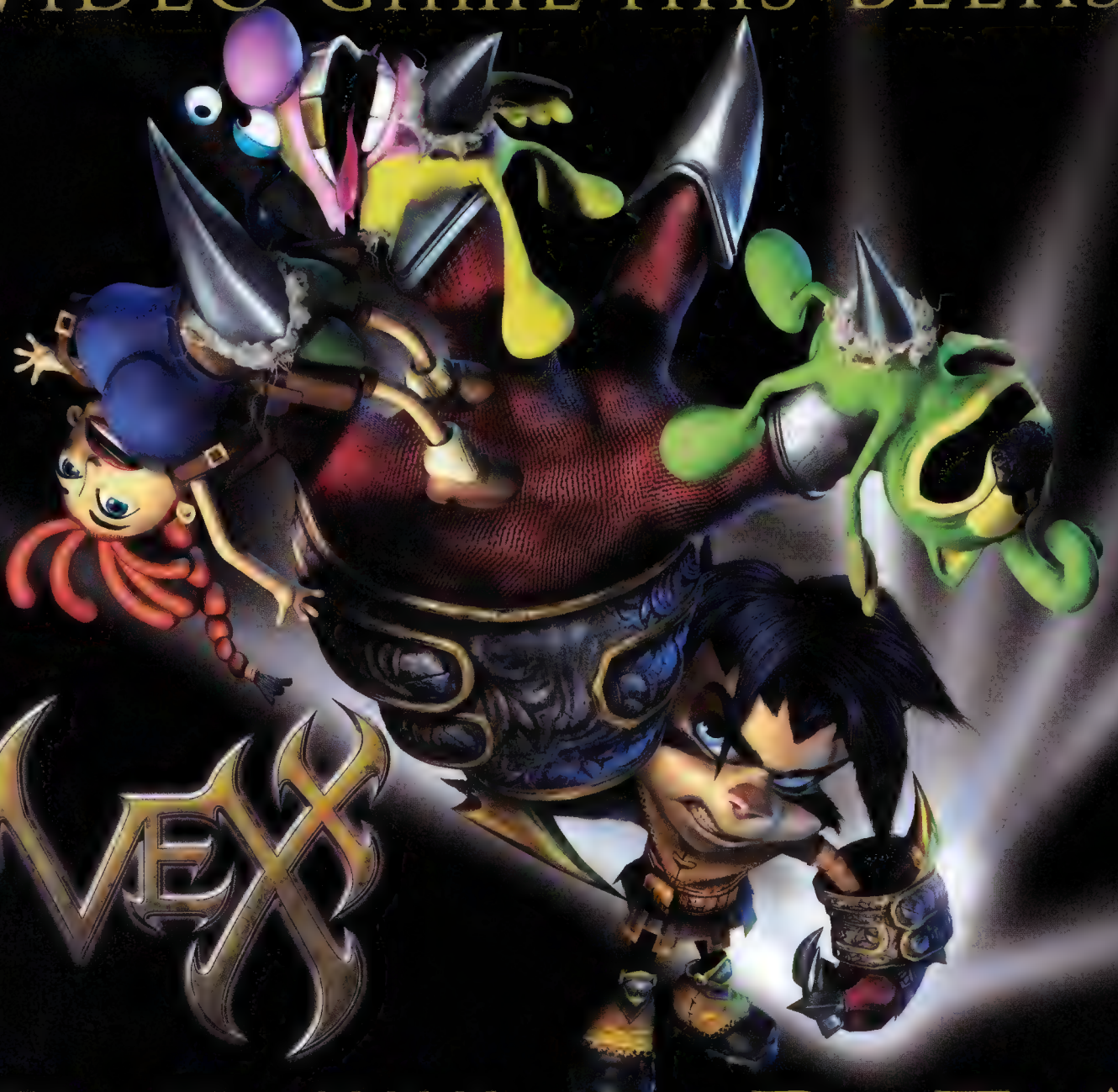
"...the most underrated set of FPS games out there."

007: nightfire — preview

PS2 XB GC — developer: ea / publisher: ea / available: november

This series continues to broaden its horizon while sticking to the raw action that marks this brand of gameplay.

VIDEO GAME HAS-BEENS



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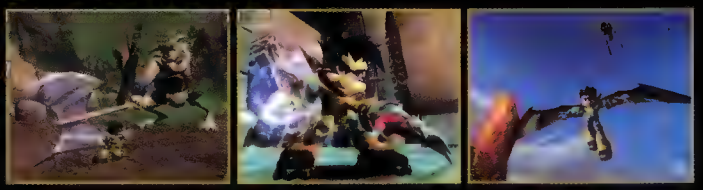

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Violence

XBOX

PlayStation.2

NINTENDO GAMECUBE.

Acclaim

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PLAYING WITH APOCALYPSE: PART TWO

As we continue our chat with 3DO about *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (see: **play 010** for *Part One*)—their mega-budget, mega-violent flagship title for 2003—we learn more about the gameplay mechanics and how exactly they plan to transition Simon Bisley's concept art into complex 3D models. Vice president/senior creative director **Michael Mendheim**, executive producer **Kelly Turner**, production painter **Dave DeVries**, and principle artist **Michael Drake** (a.k.a. Rusty) conclude **play**'s exclusive first look at what they've been working on for the last three years.

(Both images) concept paintings for the horsemen-themed levels.

***Four Horsemen* has an extremely edgy comic book aesthetic. You've already said that Bisley is working on a graphic novel version of the game as we speak, but how are you incorporating that look into the game?**

Michael: Instead of just panels, like *Max Payne*, what we'd like to do is bring some of them to life, wherein Simon's art transforms into a seamless IGC. That panel will come to life for a small action sequence, then freeze again—and that freeze is where you start the game.

Rusty: Also, in parts of the comic book—like stuff you see on the Internet with flash—we'll have simple motions with cut-out pieces that'll move over backgrounds. We don't want it to be static, because we don't want that contrast between the gameplay and the IGCs, and then just these flat images.

Michael: It's gonna be tough. That task of delivering the story—that's gonna take a lot of people to pull of. But just taking Simon's art, and transforming that into actual 3D models that are photo real, is impressive. So Simon does the comic character, then we try to transform that into a photo-real model that's obviously just completely pushed to the edge and off the wall like Jimmy Ray. But when you see him, and you see his eye, and you see how real his skin textures are—it's intense. You get that comic book character comin' to life, but it is *real*.

Rusty: It's over-the-top, but it's not into the ridiculous.

The real-time models, at least at this point, seem to have translated extremely well from Simon's 2D artwork to an interactive, 3D world. Considering he draws with such depth of texture and a surreal amount of detail, it must have been grueling to actually build a computer version of that.

Rusty: I think one of the most important things was just spending the time to study his initial character designs and make a control drawing—the front, the side, and the back—and to give the modeler something that wasn't loose, that didn't leave too much to interpretation.

Michael: We must have had at least 18 revisions on Jimmy Ray. What we did was, we'd get back the model, then we'd take Rusty's control drawings. We'd have the perfect profile of Jimmy Ray, the model in progress, and we'd put that in Photoshop; and we'd have the control drawings. And if it wasn't exactly right, they'd have to go back and change it. But that's how we were constructing the model.

Kelly: Lots of quality control; lots of back and forth.

Dave: If you're gonna use Bisley—if you're gonna get his signature style—you don't want to miss any little nuisance. Otherwise, get someone else.

Michael: I always say that we have art direction overkill on this product. We have two leads on it: One lead is in charge of environments, one lead is in charge of in-game character models. That's *all* they do. Character designs are awesome, but the key here is, do the horsemen fit into their environments? 'Cause each horseman has a world that they inhabit—their hell on Earth—when you go to fight them. When you're in Famine's palace, is it feelin' like Famine? If you had the four characters and the four environments, could anybody just go, "Oh yeah, this is Pestilence, this is War, this is Death, this is Famine?" They'll be able to do that.

Your collaboration with LA-based stunt house, Smashcut, is also quite a unique venture for a videogame. Why are you going so far to secure *Matrix*-quality choreography, considering they are the guys who gave Neo his martial arts flair?

Michael: I think that's where the industry is moving. If you want to be top-tier—if you want to be Top 10—the production levels are that high. It's just gonna get more and more. The level of realism and expectations in a videogame—they're very, very high. It's kind of different with movies. You can still rent movies from the '30s and the '40s and watch 'em. Every time a DVD comes out, you run out and buy your favorites. Videogames are kinda weird. You make one, it's out, it gets played, and then you don't go back to it. It's a frustrating industry that way.

Dave: Talking about the choreography: I've painted out of my head and I've also painted with reference. There are subtle changes in the face—subtle things that happen—that you only get with reference. How it relates to the choreography is, I recognize some of the fighting moves in other games—they're just *very* similar. It's a little frustrating. So getting a choreographer to tweak it and give it that realism is what takes it to the next level.

Michael: Well, the realism is the key. We just had somebody that actually just went to the Vatican and took tons of reference photos. As for the motion capture, we want the guy to look real, we want him to move real. And then when he fights, we wanted an over-the-top Hollywood style. As for the guys that did *The Matrix*—we're good, but we can't come up with that.

Kelly: Seeing things from a production side, who's the best at this? Who does this for a living? Who's the best voice talent? These guys come up with these kind of moves for a living. We do games for a living; we don't come up with good moves. These guys: They know where to push the envelope, they know how to use their wire harnesses and their crash pads, so they can get the most outrageous thing that we can still capture the motion of, but they can still live through it. [*Laughs*]

Michael: The designers know how many moves we need and kind of what they are. At that point, we give it to Smashcut. They have to do all the wire stuff, so they know what they can do, can't do and what's

"Every time a DVD comes out, you run out and buy your favorites. Videogames are kinda weird. You make one, it's out, it gets played, and then you don't go back to it. It's a frustrating industry that way."

—senior creative director Michael Mendheim

"The realism is the key. We just had somebody that actually just went to the Vatican and took tons of reference photos."

—senior creative director Michael Mendheim

cool. And they'll choreograph it. And it'll come back. Our director of technology will review all of their stuff, and there'll be some back and forth—just due to engine constraints—but at the end of the day, we should have some pretty cool, innovative moves that you haven't seen before.

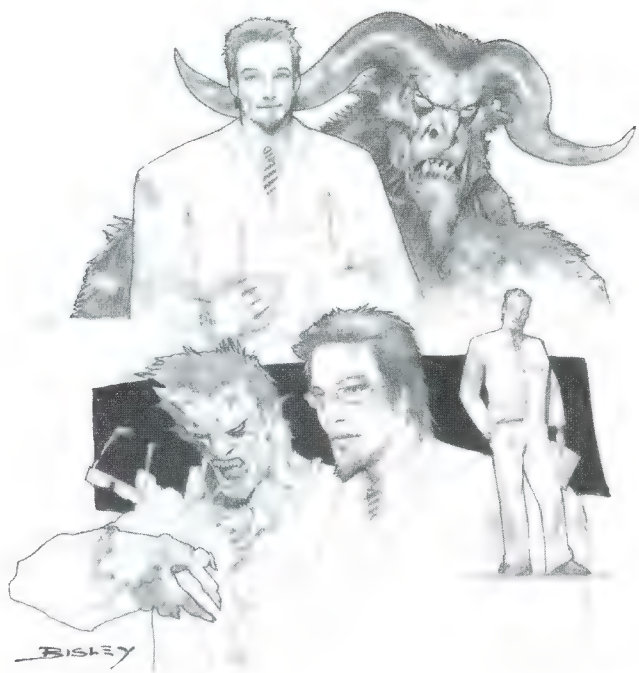
Is that where the joy in your job comes in, bringing all this top talent together to make a game?
Kelly: For me, it is. [*Smiles*]
Michael: And our headaches, too. [*Laughs*] A lot of juggling, but it's cool. You learn so much.

A lot of people will probably say that you brought in the voice talent just for the sake of having big names—Lance Henriksen, Tim Curry, Traci Lords—instead of really focusing on what they lend to the game itself. But just from hearing samples from the initial recording sessions, you seem to have found pitch-on character voices.
Kelly: We went through such a mess with the casting process. [*Laughs*]
Rusty: I remember when we were talking about this really early on, we all said Lance Henriksen was the guy.
Michael: When we were writing some of the Satan dialogue, I knew I wanted Tim Curry. It's just perfect.
Kelly: But we still did our due diligence; we still tried 50 other actors in that role just to make sure that was the one we wanted.
Michael: We couldn't get a test voice over from Tim Curry; he's just too big to do that. We had all these other voices—and there's some pretty big name talent in that list. That's a lot of CDs in the car, man.
Kelly: But we whittled it down.

What about the soundtrack?
Kelly: The score is two-sided. We're looking at some heavy metal/rock score when you're in *our* world environments—when you're in the demon bar, when you're above ground. But when you're down in the depths of hell, that's when we get pretty gothic.
Michael: We're gonna have a lot of interactive music. Also, we're not gonna be playing music throughout the whole game, because sometimes the sound of blood dripping is scarier than having a track.
Kelly: It's the tension in the silence.
Michael: It's trying to create an emotional response in the player. So the music is gonna be very selective. We're gonna use music to trick you *and* pull you in. But we'll also do some heavy metal and some very orchestral gothic.

Art direction, music, voice talent, choreographers—the whole shebang. Do you see games moving towards the inaccessible? Do you think they'll ever get to the point where they're simply too expense to produce?
Kelly: It's like your summer blockbuster—it's your tent-pole title. You've got to show that this is what you're capable of. You've got to put your neck out on the line with something very expensive, but it will pay off because that's what the public wants. It's a big gamble, but you can't make everything in your portfolio that kind of gamble.
Michael: You gotta place your chips.
Rusty: This is *our* summer blockbuster.
Kelly: Our *Christmas* blockbuster for 2003. [*Laughs*] And that's where the triple-A titles are going. **play**

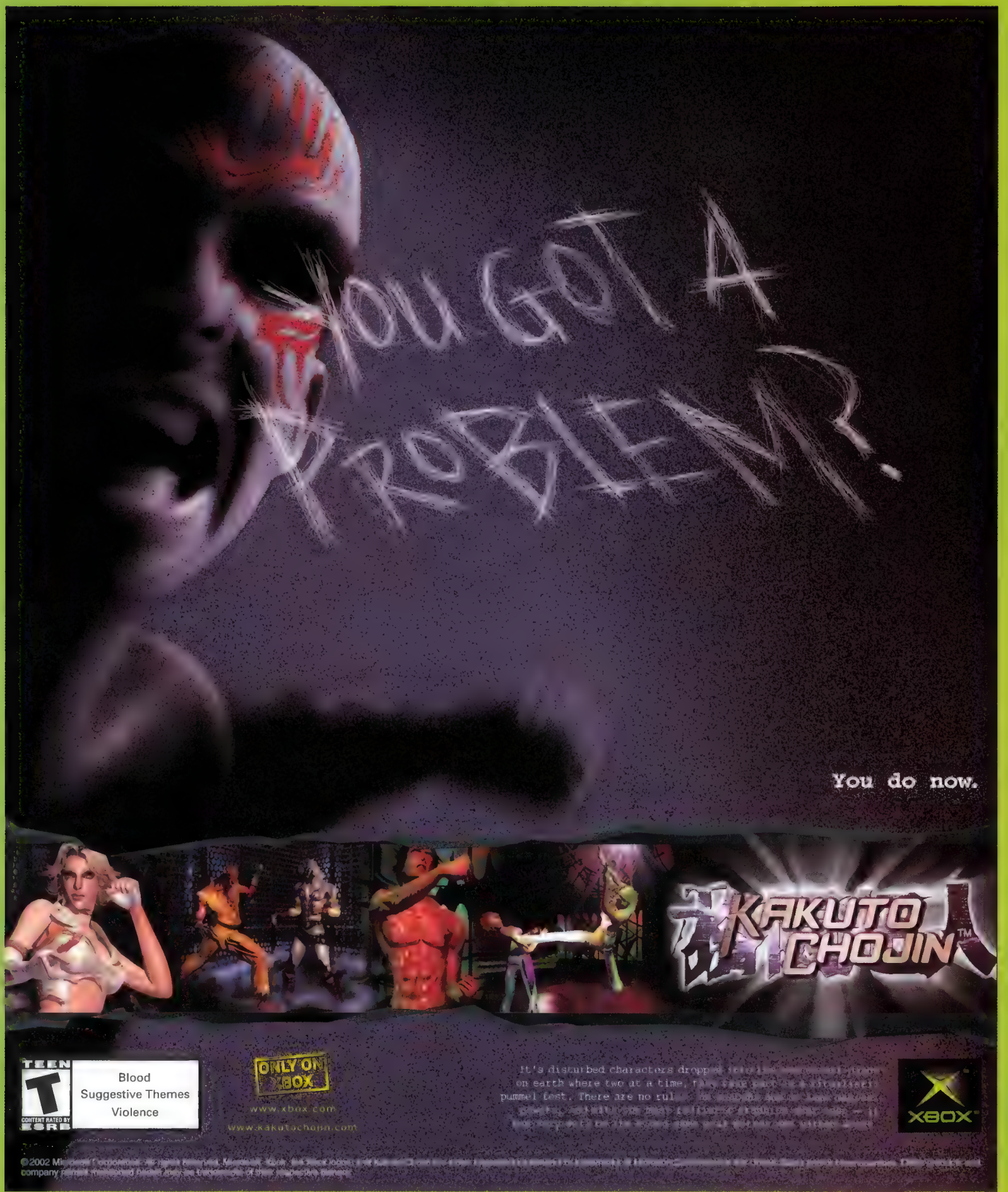
(Clockwise from top) Concept painting for possible enemy encounter; Simon Bisley's character design for Satan.



four horsemen of the apocalypse

PS2 XB GC developer: 3do / publisher: 3do / available: fall 2003

If *Four Horsemen* is as rich as the art style that inspires its frightening imagery, we will certainly be gifted one of the most unique experiences in gaming.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A *Zone of the Enders* sequel? What a great idea.

ZONE OF THE ENDERS 2: THE SECOND RUNNER

words michael hobbs

Despite its flaws, I was a big fan of the original *Zone of the Enders*. With mech designs by *Metal Gear*'s Yoji Shinkawa and easily the coolest-looking mid-air combat ever seen, the game was an aesthetic triumph. And its basic play was polished to the highest level, with a flowing, slashing dynamic that was deeply addictive. It was the kind of game that you could show off to people who don't play games.

Ah, but there were the problems. The highly-touted story element of the game fell flat to me, there was a dearth of environments, and the level objectives were far from compelling. And as good as the action was, it was a little monotonous.

From what we understand, we can kiss these problems goodbye in the sequel, *Zone of the Enders 2: The Second Runner*.

The story is now much deeper and more interesting, the game encompasses far more environments, and a good number of enhancements have been made to the battle system to allow for more variety in the action.

This is all great news, but what I am superficially most excited about is the look of the game. The real-time smoke effects are straight out of an anime and just look awesome, and the original game's overall aesthetic has been expanded in just about every way. This is one I cannot wait for.

"Kiss the problems of the original goodbye in this sequel"

Amazing new smoke effects highlight the visual upgrade in this sequel

zone of the enders 2: tsr

PS2

developer: **konami**
publisher: **konami**
available: **2003**

If you had a love/hate relationship with the original *Z.O.E.*, prepare for a love/love one with this sequel.

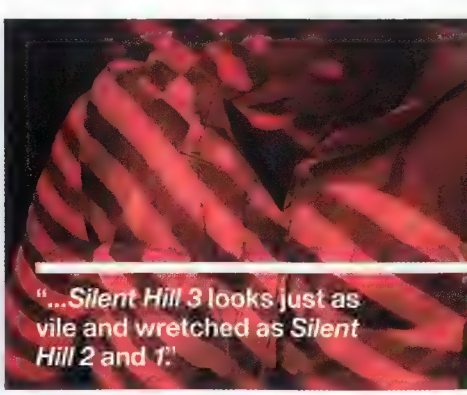
preview

The psychologically-twisted nightmare

SILENT HILL 3

words brady fiechter

Heather is just your average attractive woman, chipper and enthusiastic about her life, but then she has a birthday, goes shopping, and gets sucked into a waking nightmare. This isn't your typical nightmare, mind you, but the twisted, impenetrable, psychologically brutalized nightmare of *Silent Hill 3*, which looks just as vile and wretched as *Silent Hill 2* and *1*. *Silent Hill 3* is still a mysterious entity with few concrete details as to any of the substantial changes that are being applied. It's supposed to be a little more focused on action, but the freak-factor is still roiling nicely. When Heather arrives in her alternate dimension, a woman sickly sings happy birthday, and skinned monsters writhe and shake as she runs for her life. This game is messed up, and the designers know it and relish it. Me too.



"...*Silent Hill 3* looks just as vile and wretched as *Silent Hill 2* and *1*."

Turn on you flashlight and pray you don't drop it, otherwise you might run into this, er, thing.

silent hill 3

PS2

developer: **konami**
publisher: **konami**
available: **2003**

This third installment is a terrific graduation of the atmospheric horror that made the first two games such a success.

preview

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Field of nightmares

GHOSTMASTER

words jon m gibson

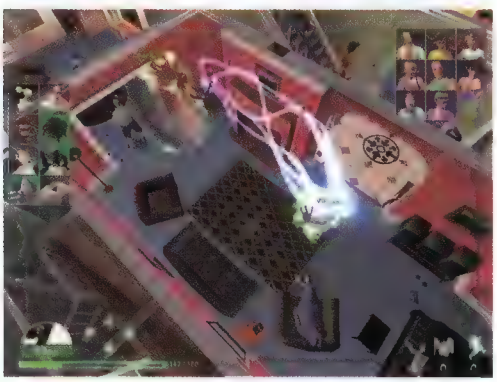
Gregg Barnett, creator of the upcoming *Ghost Master* sim, doesn't hesitate when discussing his passion for a good scare: "Who doesn't like horror? Mind you, in this case—unlike a lot of games—*Ghost Master* doesn't depend on a conventional use of horror, but rather inverts the whole process and portrays the player as the 'scarer' as opposed to the 'scaree.' This ability to scare other people from a Big Brother perspective has universal appeal. Imagine a reality show where the audience could set traps and scare the living daylights out of the people on the show. Who wouldn't enjoy that?"

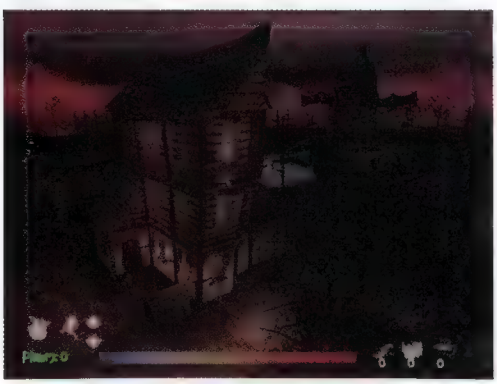
Think about it. Among the heaps of games released since the very invention of the horror gaming concept, there hasn't been a role reversal quite like this one. *Silent Hill*, *Resident Evil*, *Fatal Frame*, *Doom*—each title is relative to the scaree perspective. But *Ghost Master* spins the genre in an entirely new direction.

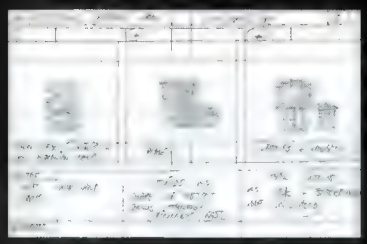
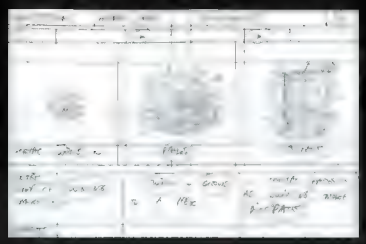
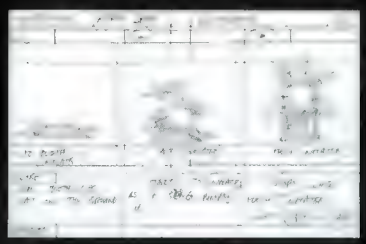
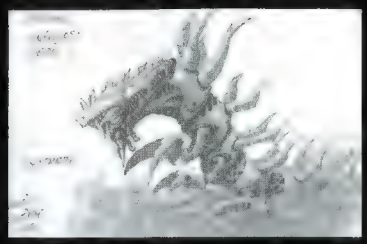
At immediate glance, the game shimmers with *Sims*-like aesthetics. But Barnett is quick to detour any preconceptions: "*Ghost Master* was designed before *The Sims* was released, so its influence on the game design is practically nil. Any likeness—including the gibberish spoken by mortals—is just coincidence." Besides, the objective here isn't to maintain a job, buy furniture, conceive a baby, and wait for social services to take the neglected, whining child away. Instead, *Ghost Master* presents players with a completely active household—they eat, they sleep, they watch TV—and requests that you oversee the haunting of their home. How you do that is where the game gets really intriguing.

"The creative ride has been wild at times," Barnett continues. "We started the motor with a Gary Larson *Farside*-style inversion of what people expect in a horror game, revved it up with lots of David Lynch-style gameplay elements and hopefully have still managed to

"In Ghost Master, you don't buy frilly curtains for your mortals, Barnett jokes. "You set lose your ghosts to scare their little frilly panties off them!"





park it on Stephen King Main Street, USA." It's obvious: The *Ghost Master* team isn't shy about their pop culture sensibilities. In fact, each of the 20 levels in the game is based quite snuggly on cult movie classics. Test your knowledge: "The Blair Wisp," "Ghoul, Interrupted," "Full Mortal Jacket," "Trainspooking." With each environment comes a reverent sense of humor attached (a la *Austin Powers*' take on the spy genre) with tongue planted firmly in cheek. It's not mockery; it's homage.

The same goes for the numerous poltergeists at your disposal, each loosely inspired by some undead trick you might see during a Halloween movie marathon on TNT (ranging from visual stimuli like an infestation of spiders to more shocking haunts like an incandescent electrical surge).

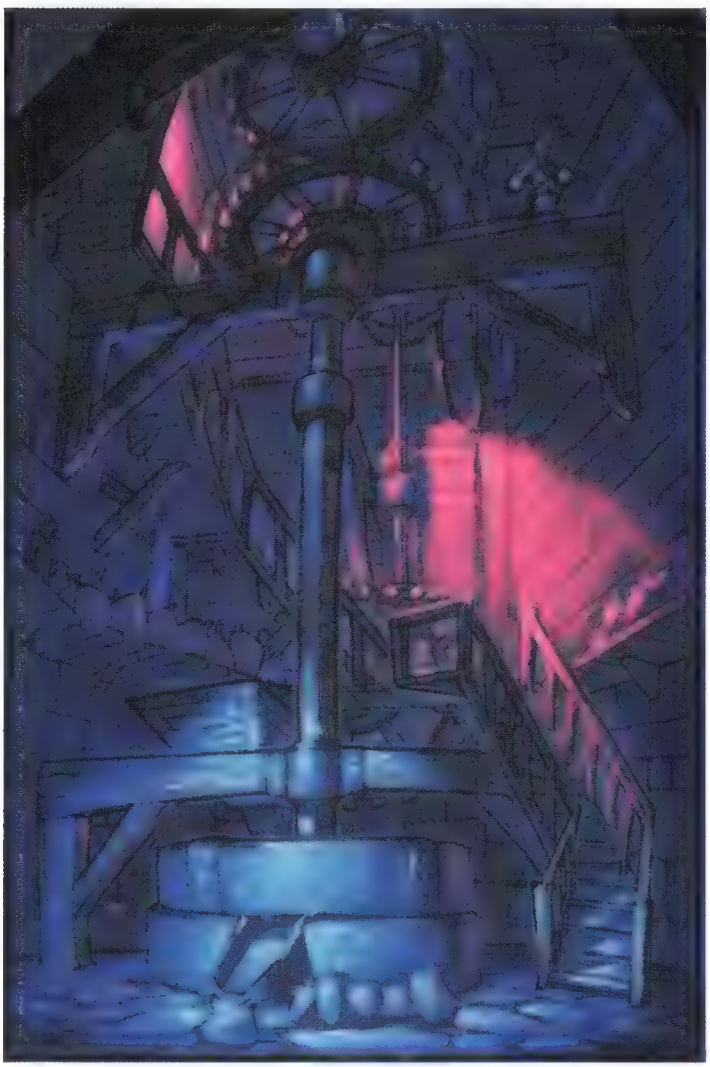
"Mortals in the game are pretty much like mortals in real life—they have affinities to people, places, things, and tasks that they like, and aversions to those they don't," Barnett shares, undeniably eager to talk about what him and his team at Sick Puppies have sculpted. "They have normal bodily functions, some of which can even fail when they get really scared! They have all five senses, so they can hear, smell, touch and even taste danger—they even have that sixth sense where you know something big, nasty, and slimy is behind you... but you can't just bring yourself to turn and look. They have conscious fears and they have subconscious fears. They are also naturally curious and easily form those B-horror-movie groups. And to top it all off, they haven't even seen *Scream*—so they break *all* the rules, *all* the time. So, with all that information gathering ability—not to mention that *Scream* thing—it's no wonder that a player with up to 50 ghosts, 150 paranormal effects, and a naturally perverse desire to scare the bejesus out of everything that moves can usually have a great time."

However, not every building you occupy poses easy-to-shrill residents. *Ghost Master* is quick to introduce some anti-terror icons players may be familiar with—and others that might not ring a bell. An exorcist is one of the first forms of adversity, exciting more of a challenge when it comes to possession; para-psychologists can ruin your chances of success with their ghost-tracking gadgetry; and ghost breakers, with paranormal extinguishers in tow, aren't afraid to zap your regime of spirits back to the netherworld.

The ultimate goal in each level, though, is to manipulate the frightened folks to uncover the various corpses scoured throughout each home. Barnett explains the process: "Your aura-reading banshee determines that a mortal has a bit of a conscious fear of spiders—no drama, just let one of your hordes bomb them with a small legion of spiders. Your sandman enters a sleeping mortal's dreams and tells you that they have a subconscious fear of blood—great, time to let your favorite spook flood the room with blood. There's lots of powers at your disposal for scaring mortals; half the fun is in seeing what you can achieve with them."

In your fifth spiritual mission, "Calamityville Horror," a clueless family moves into a colonial home. Your job: Using your reservoir of apparitions, pushing the new residents to the edge by unleashing the captive ghosts. It seems that the previous owner, a lonely old lady, dropped dabs of poison in the tea of her visitors, preventing them from leaving—permanently. As you locate each of the trapped spirits, they'll tell their story via some hysterical sound bites (i.e. the dead, Avon-inspired saleswoman will rattle off her perfume pitch). The more bodies you lay to rest, effectively scaring the family in the meantime, causes your ectoplasm meter to rise. As you collect more—garnering the supernatural juice from the overall "world fear" rating—your manifestations will gradually increase from light to nasty. As the game progresses, those abilities will advance into a uniquely visceral high.

And while the game itself will just breeze by an All Hallows Eve release date, *Ghost Master* will surely retain that ghastly spirit for players that are in the mood for a haunting more than one day a year. **play**



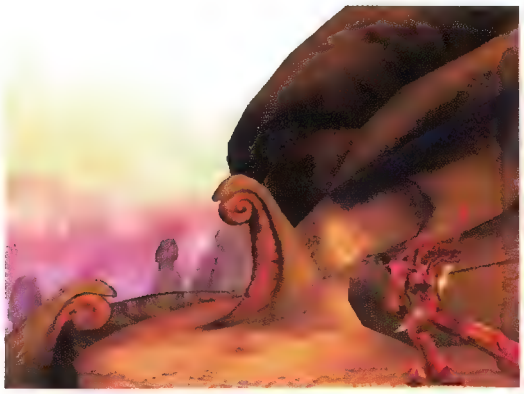
"Among the heaps of games released since the very invention of the horror gaming concept, there hasn't been a role reversal quite like this one."

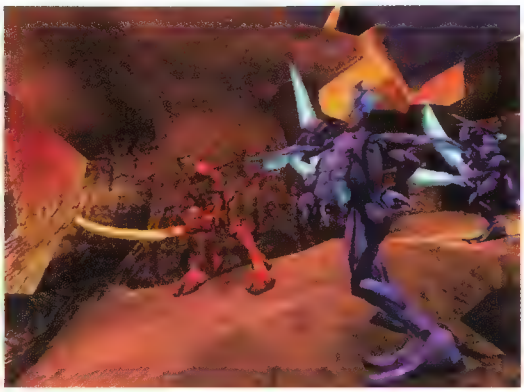
ghost master

PS2 XB PC

developer: **sick puppies** / publisher: **[illegible]**
available: **q4 (pc); 2003 (ps2, xbox)**

With franchises like *Silent Hill* and *Resident Evil* pitting players against the undead, *Ghost Master* is a refreshing—and hysterical—take on the age-old genre of horror. Why fight a demon when you can possess it?



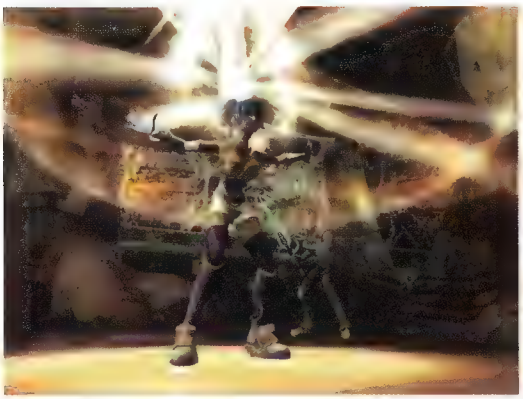


Alter Echo

PS2

developer: [illegible] / publisher: [illegible] / available: [illegible]

[illegible] gameplay to [illegible]

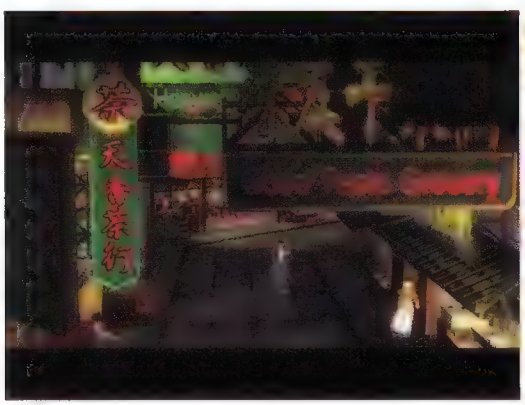


Sudeki

XB

developer: **climax** / publisher: **microsoft** / available: **2003**

Climax's (creators of *LandStalker* and *Shining Force*) latest for the Xbox could turn the tide in the turn-based RPG wars, and deliver team green their first big role-playing brand.



Shenmue II

XB

developer: [illegible] / publisher: [illegible] / available: [illegible]

[illegible]

Red Dead Revolver

PS2

developer: **capcom** / publisher: **capcom**
available: **march '03**

Capcom's answer to *Sunset Riders*, *Red Dead Revolver* won't be moseying onto PS2 now until March. Luckily, some new screens blew into town to tide us over.

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Evolution Skateboarding

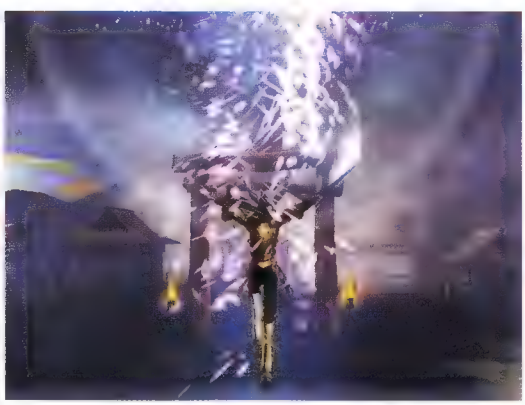
PS2

Disney Skateboarding

PS2 XB

developer: **konami** / publisher: **konami** / available: **fall**

Imagine the first level of *Sonic Adventure*, only wider and on skateboards with Disney characters. Or not—that's a weird thing to imagine. We'll cover it next month.



Otogi

XB

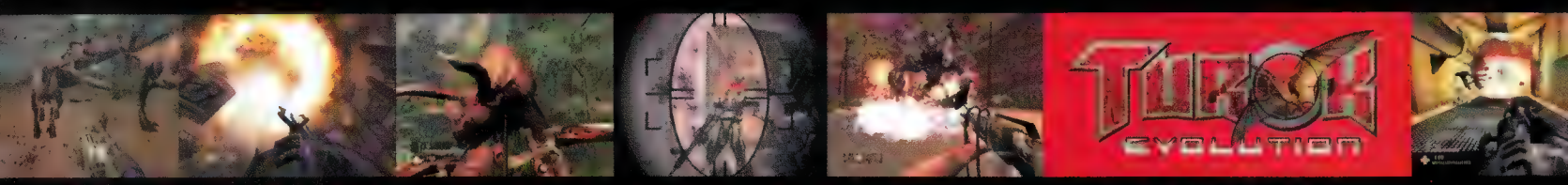
Colin McRae Rally 3

PS2 GC XB

developer: **codemasters** / publisher: **codemasters**
available: **fall**

Coiln McRae has its work cut out for it this year with *V-Rally* showing up around the same time; both games redefine the genre. Look for our shootdown in our next issue.

THEY SMELL BLOOD. YOURS



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MATURE M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood and Gore
Violence

GAME BOY ADVANCE
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XBOX
PlayStation.2
Acclaim

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Revengus raccoonus

SLY COOPER AND THE THIEVIUS RACCOONUS

words dave halverson

One thing can be said about *Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus* above anything else—it's got style. In fact, presentation-wise, you'll not find a better action game... anywhere. Sucker Punch has applied a thick coating of attitude and comic flair to Sly's plight that closes the book on cool, so dim the lights and get ready for some covert action of the "raccoonus" kind.

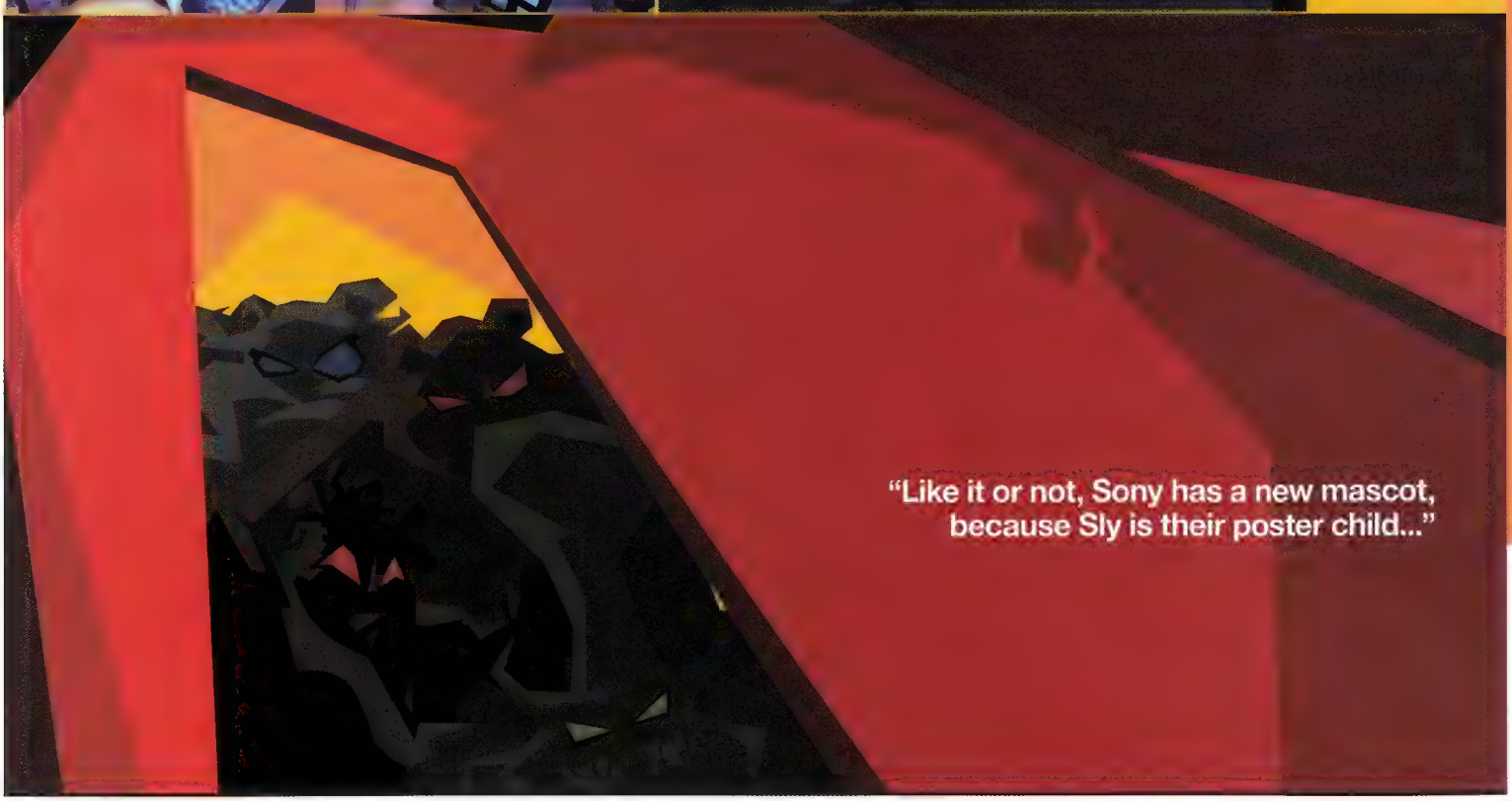
The game follows Sly as he pays a friendly visit to the Fiendish Five that stormed his family's domicile, did-in Mom and Dad, and stole their sacred thievery tome, The Thievius Raccoonus, filled with secret techniques passed down from generation to generation. For each page Sly retrieves, he applies its technique, which in turn plays into the framework of the game—par for the course in any good action-adventure, but executed oh-so cleverly here.

The components that set *Sly Cooper* apart can be found in just about every nook and cranny of the game, beginning with the team aspect of the framework and skillful voice work. Primed for Saturday-morning TV and/or merchandising, we join Sly in full stride, with two sidekicks (buds from the Happy Camper Orphanage where he grew up after the attack) by his side: Bentley the Turtle, the brains of the bunch; and a dim-witted hippo named Murray, the driver and comic relief of the trio, who likes to play his PSOne between levels. Taking a page out of Monkey Punch's *Lupin* saga, Sly even has a cop on his tail whose life's ambition it is to take him down, only this cop is a lovely female (well, lovely if you're a walking male raccoon)—inspector Carmelita Fox, who he wants to, er, get with. All of these elements figure in to not only the story but also the gameplay, pegging the

diversity scale, while leaving us wanting more of each. Instead of giving us all of the *Sly* action we can stomach, Sucker Punch gives us four Happy Meals: Sly's action-stealth play (the backbone of the game); cat-and-mouse capers with Carmelita; turret-style shooting; and some truly awesome racing segments. Coupled with a look that is unique and masterfully designed and a warped cartoon vibe that's distinctly distinct, *Sly Cooper* is the year's most well-rounded, attractive, and flat-out fun action game—but it's also a little like Chinese food, if you catch my drift. The fact that it's not an "epic" along the lines of *Ratchet & Clank, Malice, Vexx, Mario Sunshine, Star Fox Adventures*, and *Ty Tiger* actually weighs heavily in its favor.

Like it or not, Sony has a new mascot, because Sly is their poster child—an every-man's action game that lends itself to a sequel for all the right reasons: buttery control, a great theme with great supporting players, and oh-so-many places to go with the tiered gameplay. It's about time Sony got themselves a new player anyway; since *Crash*, Sony's critter cage has been vacant. Better fill that water dish. **play**

Carmelita Fox wonders if Sly has a little penius raccoonus.



"Like it or not, Sony has a new mascot, because Sly is their poster child..."

sly cooper and the thievius raccoonus — **play** rating

PS2 developer: **sucker punch** / publisher: **sony** / available: **now**

The best straight action game since, well, since I can't remember. Sucker Punch's first outing on the PS2 is simply glorious.

Packs just enough iron to hit the target

WILD ARMS 3

words brady fiechter

If *Wild Arms 3* were a picture book, I'd enjoy flipping through its bright, richly-colored pages, admiring a distinct Old-West inspired aesthetic, filled with searing-sun tones and weathered settings. Its world is drawn as if by a kaleidoscope of soft-colored pencils, with a static texturing layering a dreamy, lovely texture. Nothing out there looks quite like *Wild Arms 3*, and for once, this isn't a banal praise.

But as the third, most ambitious adventure in a mildly popular first-party series now on PS2, a good-looking game was to be expected; what wasn't expected is such a thinly-written, loosely-structured story. There is rarely any motivating threat or impactful event to spark emotion, and the intrinsically flat desires of the heroes as hopeful drifters strains under the dialogue that seems even more damaged from the sloppy Japanese-to-English translation. And where there are moments of gathering momentum in the story, abrupt and often arbitrary sequences trip up the progress.

For those moments of weakness, *Wild Arms 3* does fight back by grabbing hold with swift, intense battles and an emphasis on dungeon exploration. Party members must work together, solving puzzles and disarming traps with the combination of individual tools, like bombs and boomerangs. The projectile ARMs attacks and the summon and spell system aren't terrifically refreshing, but they do bring a consistently involving edge to the combat.

There are a handful of mild innovations to *Wild Arms 3*, like the ability to exchange currency for resurrection and avoiding battle with a points system, is a good way of breaking away the tedium of random encounters. For all its poor storytelling, there is still enough done right to appease the hungriest RPG gamer. **play**

"Nothing out there looks quite like *Wild Arms 3*..."

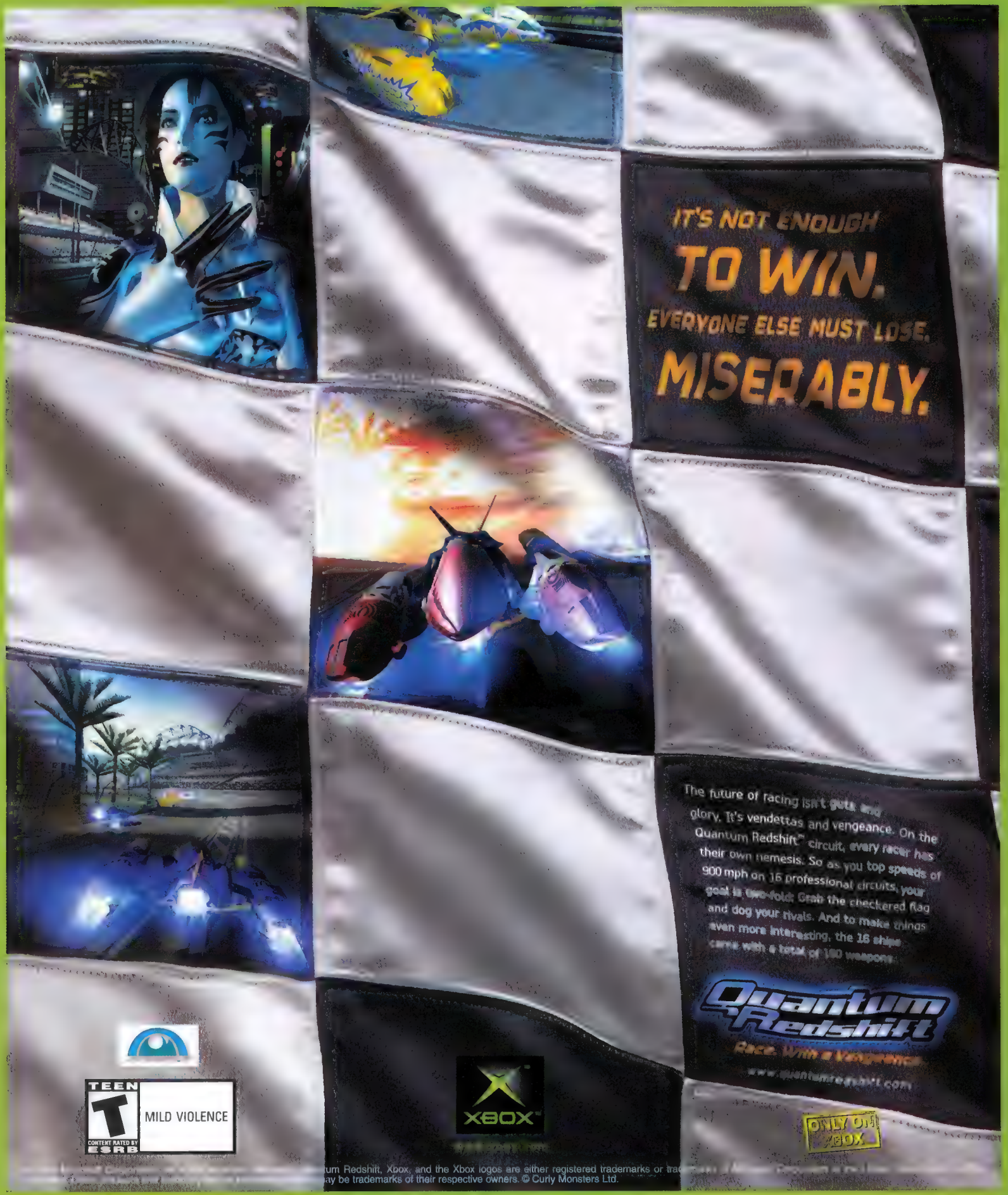
wild arms 3

play rating

PS2

developer: **contrail** / publisher: **sony** / available: **november**

Look past the shaky dialogue and you'll find a strong RPG that will especially satisfy fans of the series.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MILD VIOLENCE

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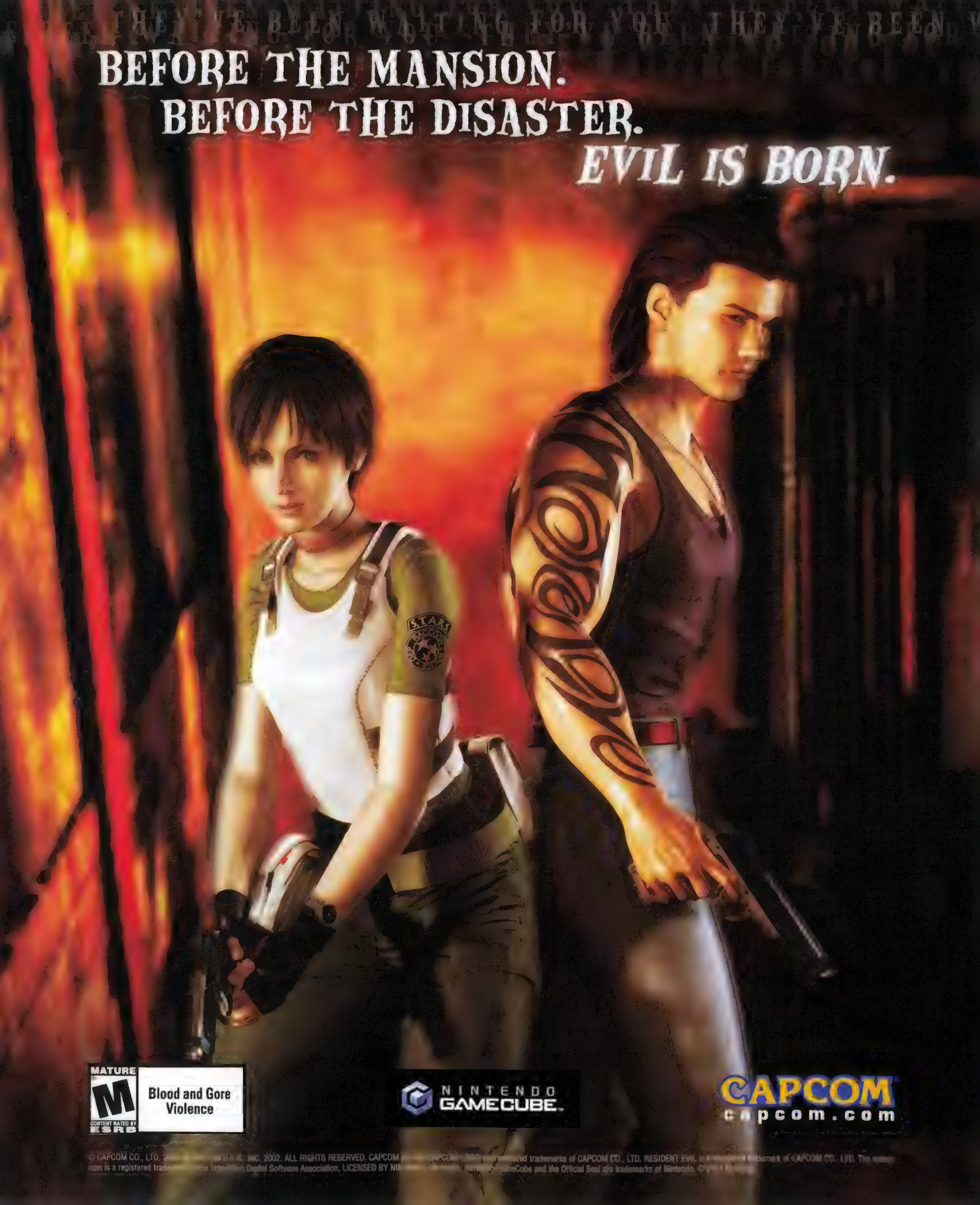
BEFORE THE MANSION.
BEFORE THE DISASTER.
EVIL IS BORN.
MATURE
M
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Resident Evil Zero

Changing the sands of time with brutal force

TIMESPLITTERS 2

words brady fiechter

[redacted] receiving a valiant rescue, waddle away in high-pitched squeaks of thanks. [redacted] bludgeon you with the stubs leftover from a fine shotgun blast. Decapitations don't always stop the onslaught either, leaving no other option but to shoot again until the [redacted] up in the future, goofy gunslingers in the Old-West, slick gangsters in prohibition-era Chicago, and peculiar hackers in future Tokyo.

All this adds up to a similar yet highly improved sequel to the malnourished [redacted] quotient set on full throttle, but everything about *TimeSplitters 2* is handled skillfully and stylishly, pieced together with a scintillating polish. A few diversions set the levels up for minor task solving—blow the device, activate the switch, remove the object—but the source of engagement is all-out combat. The game is traditional in [redacted] level format, no impact from storytelling, no jump button or adventure qualities. So well designed are the settings and madly aggressive is the enemy that your interest in the game is purely driven by the rush of the gun discharge.

The game's only real source of contention: I prefer a lengthy, dedicated FPS experience, and I still feel that the game is slightly disjointed and focused on the deathmatch appeal. There is a wealth of options and modes to play, the multiplayer angle is awesome, and the map-builder adds even more replay. For what it sets out to accomplish, *TimeSplitters 2* smokes the competition. **play**

Slick and wildly stylized, the game looks absolutely smashing.

"*TimeSplitters 2* is handled skillfully and stylishly, pieced together with a scintillating polish."

timesplitters 2

XB PS2 GC PC

developer: free radical / publisher: eidos / available: now

TimeSplitters was good but limited, and this dedicated sequel improves in almost every area.

RC God

R.A.D. (ROBOT ALCHEMIC DRIVE)

words dave halverson

I wish, more than you can imagine, that I could tout *R.A.D.* as the sensation I presumed it would be, based on Sandlot's last robot epic, *Robot Dandy*, a similar game made for the PlayStation that sadly never made its way stateside. Unfortunately, I can only truly celebrate *R.A.D.*'s main draw, the euphoric sensation of commanding 75 tons of giant robot, plodding through city streets locked in heated battle. The similar framework to *Dandy*'s—giving the player Gigantor-like control over a massive robot, Meganite, sent into battle the invading Volgara Robots—offers the best robot fighting you can possibly imagine. The RPG elements that support it, however, often fall short. Between fights, as reports come in through the game's facetious broadcast, BNN News, the anchor delivers the flattest, driest commentary you can possibly imagine leading into the game's human drama (or lack thereof). And as you control your human counterpart (one of three available) on the ground, not only are the models bland and under-designed, but they animate and control poorly, with little connectivity to the environments. Therefore, components of the game that should heighten tension and draw you in have the opposite effect. Granted, the role-playing aspects of *R.A.D.* are not the game's main draw; if they were as good as Dandy's, the game on the whole would benefit greatly.

One new aspect of the gameplay I found particularly satisfying was the gravity drive (rocket-powered underpants!), which allows you to boost your way up onto the Meganite's shoulders—some 20 stories high—and control it from there. I don't care how flat the RPG elements are; this is killer. While it's a much better strategy to play RC-god from the ground, this needs to be experienced at least once. The overall sensation of controlling something so huge that operates as well and convincingly as *R.A.D.* is hard to describe; it's genuinely intoxicating, and the control mechanism, using the shoulder pads and analogs in unison with the robots arms and legs, is like... well, it's really great.

If *R.A.D.* did have role-playing and story elements to support the action, as good as its PS predecessor, you'd be looking at the next big thing. Instead, you're looking at the next really good thing that needs a sequel. Either way, it's just dandy. **play**

"You're looking at the next really good thing that needs a sequel."

R.A.D. (robot alchemic drive)

play rating

PS2

developer: **sandlot** / publisher: **enix** / available: **october**

Although the role-playing elements need work, there is no denying the power of *RAD*'s best attributes. Controlling massive mech units is a gas!

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CHNL	8:00	9:00	10:00	11:00	12:00	1:00	2:00
XBOX	**Whacked!**—Game Show VIOLENCE		(2002) A wild, multi-player, free-for-all combat game. Players must sabotage one another with 7 unique characters plus one sick and twisted host in 13 diverse environments with 30+ weapons and power-ups.				
XBOX LIVE	**Whacked!**—Game Show VIOLENCE (Now online)		For added mayhem, play online with Xbox *Live* and trample, torch, and trash-talk other gamers in a 4-player melee.				

www.whackedtv.com

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Mature Sexual Themes
Violence
Strong Language

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Cat in the 'Box

BLINX: THE TIME SWEEPER

words dave halverson

Only Naoto Ohshima, the co-creator of *Sonic the Hedgehog*, could come up with a race of cats that make and deliver time to different worlds, and one cat in particular, Blinx, who'll risk all nine of his lives to save one such world, along with its human princess. Problem: The Tom-Tom Gang, who steal and sell time on the black market, has stolen so much that world "B1Q64" is about to go nuclear. Solution: A cat with a vacuum cleaner. Glitches in time become crystals and, eventually, crystals become monsters, and for now, that is all you need to know. There are two types of people in this world: those who will take that information and act on it and those who... Hey! Don't turn the page!

Such is the joy of videogames that such a universe can exist outside the mind and be brought to life for us all to explore. And so muscle-bound is the Hummer of home consoles—the Xbox—that it's become the ultimate conduit for creators like Ohshima to bring their visions to light. *Blinx* is of that rare breed of game that exists, for the most part, as the result of one man's vision, like Sonic was to Naoto and Naka, or Mario and Link to Miyamoto. It's a boarding pass to a strange place, where you'll do things you've never dreamt among characters you've never imagined, much less spurted trash at. Sucking up anything not affixed to the environments, via the Time Sweeper, and then blowing it back out at said monsters until the area is clear, is the basis of the action in *Blinx*, although it's much easier said than done. In order to achieve this simple goal, you'll need to learn how and when to manipulate time via "pause," "rewind," "fast forward," "record," and "playback." Each area in *Blinx* is constructed, populated, and rigged with events designed to make time manipulation an entertaining and addicting new gaming experience, shrouded in gorgeous visuals and music that (sorry for this) warms your heart; and It works so well that *Blinx* borders on impossible to put down. If this game doesn't make you smile, then you probably don't have a mouth.

Little is left to be said after last month's cover story except to say that the overall package, especially in terms of replay value, exceeds my expectations, putting *Blinx* among my top five games of the year. It's purr-fect... Sorry for that, too. **play**

What could be more entertaining than a cat with a vacuum?

"If this game doesn't make you smile then you probably don't have a mouth."

blinx: the time sweeper

play rating ●●●●●

XB

developer: **artoon** / publisher: **microsoft** / available: **october**

An absolute gem of a platformer, inventive, addicting, and infinitely replayable– Onshima hasn't lost a step.

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TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Suggestive Themes
Violence

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PHANTASY STAR ONLINE
EPISODE I & II

words dave halverson

If ever a game had a mysterious aura, it is *Phantasy Star On* (or off) *line*. How happy am I about being able to say "offline"? Well, more so than you can imagine, as I am not only a disciple of the church of *Phantasy Star*, but believe that online gaming is highly overrated, if not a complete waste of time. After convincing many a console gamer of exactly the opposite back during the Dreamcast's wonderful yet short-lived lifespan, *PSO* is back in newfound glory, here to mesmerize many thousands more, in ways its Dreamcast brethren never could. Not only is the sequel (*Episode 2*) included on the disc, but an option to play a specifically balanced offline game in "single mode" is also newly in tow, making this a shoe-in contender for RPG of the year. I should also say that as an online experience, *PSO: E1 & 2* is the best there is—unmatched for team play, at least that's the consensus among the online contingent here at **play**.

It's hard to put your finger on exactly what makes *PSO* so addicting on an almost supernatural level, how gameplay so rudimentary can cause hours to melt away like minutes. For me, personally, it's a combination of things, beginning with the music, which has brought me as close to an out-of-body experience as I have ever been. Combined with its intrinsic air of mystery, discovery, and the nature of the beasts within its many stunning environments, the overall experience is one of complete immersion.

There is an uncanny sense of empowerment attached to every level gained, as you chip away at monster after monster, sans a lock-on battle system or sophisticated camera, amidst the game's beautiful labyrinths. The framework, unlike that of a true *Phantasy Star*, encompasses a single hub for receiving intelligence, acquiring missions from the Hunter's Guild and outfitting your character. Aside from Monomate, Telepipes, and other such *Phantasy Star* regalia, everything else is pretty much from scratch, save for the character designs, which are classic *Phantasy Star*. In addition, unlike most GameCube ports, *PSO* benefits greatly from its new home, with a bevy of new lighting and water effects, improved textures, and even deeper character schematics from which to mold your character.

Whether you play online or off, *PSO: E1 & 2* is a must-own game for the GameCube, ranking among the console's most elite offerings to date. As the best Sega has brought to the console by far, let's hope this is just the beginning for one of gaming's most revered RPG brands. **play**

"It's hard to put your finger on exactly what makes *PSO* so addicting..."

No high speed net connection? No problem.

phantasy star online: episode 1 & 2 — **play** rating

GC developer: **sonic team** / publisher: **sega** / available: **now**

With a newly added single-player mode, *PSO* is now all things to all people.

THE MOST ACCLAIMED GAME OF THE YEAR

- "Awesome"
  IGN
- "Heir Apparent to GoldenEye"
  - Electronic Gaming Monthly
- "A Brilliant Game"
  - Nintendo Power
- "First Halo, Now This"
  - Xbox Nation
- "The Definitive PS2 Shooter"
  - PSM
- "...a Game of the Year Title..."
  - Gaming Horizon

TimeSplitters 2™

OUT NOW!

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Violence

EIDOS INTERACTIVE

XBOX

GAMECUBE

PlayStation 2

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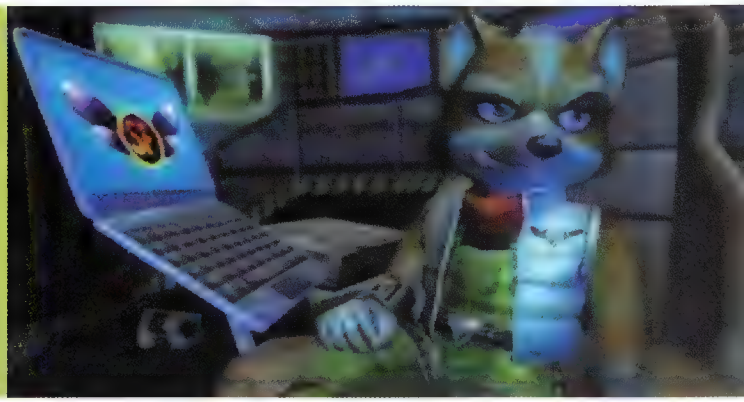
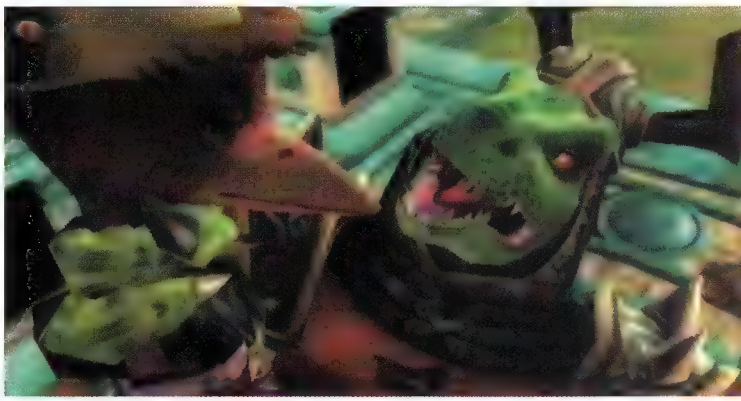
A star is reborn

STAR FOX ADVENTURES

Look at the gameplay pic.
SFA is truly a wonder to behold.



"Like all Rare-designed worlds, Dinosaur Planet has its own ecosystem, laws and politics."



Embarking on any Rare-or-NCL-designed game, there's always that sacred first few minutes as you become acclimated with the game's systems, music, characters, effects, tone, and environments. With *Star Fox Adventures,* these are more joyous than you can possibly imagine. Beginning the game as Krystal—a beautiful human/fox hybrid covered in soft blue fur, in search of the truth surrounding her parent's death—her coat, facial expressions, and mannerisms are beyond compare. As the world you've entered slowly fades into view, enveloping you more with each passing minute, you soon cross the threshold and by the time Star Fox touches down on Dinosaur Planet, you are completely rapt.

Like all Rare-designed worlds, Dinosaur Planet has its own ecosystem, laws, and politics, but it also echoes the *Zelda* games of late, *Ocarina* especially; co-producer Shigeru Miyamoto's fingerprints are all over it. Produced by Miyamoto and Pete Stamper, Rare's last gift, due in no small part to this union, is the rarest of gems. *Star Fox Adventures* is a *Zelda* adventure applied to the *Star Fox* universe, combining Miyamoto's smooth execution and control-style, with Rare's incredible design and scope. In other words, this is not a game to merely be played, but celebrated, especially given recent events.

Landing on the planet, initially, it all seems almost overwhelming, because like any great Nintendo-bred adventure... it is. There is much to learn about Dinosaur Planet, although you'll be compelled to run around, soaking it all in, studying the stunning character you're controlling, swimming in the crystal-clear water, and watching the moon rise up in the sky—which you should to avoid sensory overload. From the massive stone golem in the distance to McCloud's amazing fur, standing on the threshold of this game one is reminded why we love doing this so very much.

The gameplay in *SFA* revolves around several systems that support the overall design, beginning with Krystal's staff. Once you find it (Fox practically lands on it) and become its master, upgrading it within underground shrines (remember the fairy pools in *Ocarina*) unlocks new ways to move forward in the game. Collecting scarabs (the planet's currency) and spores (used to plant bomb-spore plants that can be exploded to open cracks), the staff is the key to opening your way. Like *Ocarina*, as you progress, you will be able to carry more—and therefore do more—through a menu system that is both innovative and easy to use. In fact, literally all of the *Zelda* components apply, like upgrade-based progression, edge-controlled jumping, projectile shooting, riding animals, cause-and-effect puzzles, and bosses that take both brains and brawn to bring down, including the T-Rex encounter of a lifetime. Add to that rocket-sled races and some very special surprises and, well, it's simply magical.

Another first: Seeing as how Rare tends to make things immense and discovery-heavy (therefore easy to get lost or off-track in), *SFA* boasts a real-time strategy guide built right in the game to alleviate any frustration that might creep in. General Pepper lays out your objective, Peppy shows you exactly where you should be, and Slippy gives you hints the entire way should you become stuck. As a rule, it's best not to use it since the game is all about discovery, but a couple of times I was very grateful to have Slippy by my side. Speaking of such, Fox's helper, Tricky, the prince of the Earth-walkers, is the coolest sidekick since *Shinobi*'s faithful doggy. I found myself actually stopping and waiting for him (he often falls behind) and bought his ball as soon as I could afford it, so I could play with the little guy and watch him change colors. Tricky digs things out of the ground, holds switches, burns through thick bush, and

generally keeps you company throughout the game. I was thinking of getting one after the game, but then I realized, they're extinct. So I put horns on my pug and painted him.

The settings in *SFA* cover the usual ground (jungles, shrines, canyons, snow-covered mountains, temples, lava pits, etc.), but they are simply breathtaking. The architecture and overall presentation of the world is extraordinary—truly special—and every dinosaur tribe (representing tyrannosaurus, triceratops, pterodactyl, raptor, and more) is astonishingly modeled, down to the most minute detail, including unprecedented expression through facial animation. Dealing with the enemies, lock-on fighting simply has never looked or felt this good. Again, I'm taken back to *Ocarina*—the blocking, the rolling, the animation. The models are flawless and the way the backgrounds fade, framing the fights in cinematic style, it simply doesn't get any better.

One initial area of concern I had—the flying levels—thankfully serve as short segues into each scenario, encompassing little more than a minute or so flying through a requisite amount of gold rings amidst a beautiful meteor cluster. These are quick, fun, and nice to look at—nothing more. Trying to combine a real shooter into the game would have been a mistake; gladly Rare averted doing so.

I'll leave you by simply saying that *Star Fox Adventures* is a triumph, and a very bittersweet one at that. Sadly, it's become the ultimate swan song, marking the end of one of the greatest relationships in videogame history and the beginning of what will hopefully be one just as prosperous and awe-inspiring. **play**

"*Star Fox Adventures* is a triumph and a very bittersweet one at that."

star fox adventures — play rating ●●●●●

GC

developer: **rare** / publisher: **nintendo** / available: **now**

What can I say? It's the last time I'll ever play a Rare-made Nintendo game. I loved *SFA* from beginning to end, and I'm playing it again right now. Thanks for the memories. I will miss this.

Death is my business
and business is good.

HITMAN 2
SILENT ASSASSIN

OUT NOW

MATURE 17+ — Blood, Strong Sexual Content, Violence

XBOX | PC CD | PlayStation®2

hitman2.com

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It's Rayning, it's pouring, the old man is... oh shit, he's dead

BLOODRAYNE

words dave halverson

Given the task of creating the perfect videogame hero or heroine, one might go for something along the lines of a shapely female—long and nimble, ample breasted, adorned in skintight leather, and as deadly as Armageddon... either that or something in a beast or critter. Majesco has taken the road less traveled in creating their new queen, agent BloodRayne, and taken the term "drop-dead gorgeous" to exotic new levels. Not only does this vampeel kill, but she does so with such verve and unbridled pleasure that your inner demon ends up needing a cigarette.

On assignment for the Brimstone Society—a shadow organization that hunts down and exterminates paranormal and/or supernatural threats—in her videogame debut, BloodRayne is on the tail of a deranged Nazi General, Jurgen Wulf, a madman (even for a Nazi) amassing occult relics from around the world in the hopes of ushering in a new era of German supremacy.

Molding this into an action-adventure worth sinking your teeth into, Terminal Reality has worked some serious magic, going from concept to shrink-wrap in under two years. They've injected a healthy dose of originality into the horror mold, adding a level of sexuality and fluidity seldom seen, and managed to avoid every cliché in the book along the way. There's no sidekick, no love interest, no hanging and pulling herself up, no ladders, no grappling along ledges, and no save-the-world scenario in *BloodRayne*;

just a bunch of crazy Krauts messing with the occult, and one hot vampire chick with a perfect body, out for a little revenge, with an in-game model (especially on Xbox) that is just too fine. Dispensing with the obvious, the textures (at least on Xbox, the version played for this review) are excellent overall, the frame-rate is fluid and stutter-free, and although there are some minor collision hiccups, the game is tight, and I'm not just talking about BloodRayne's leathers. More time could have been spent acclimating her model with sloped surfaces, but otherwise, all is well.

Some of the things that make BloodRayne so intoxicating are her combination of techniques, orchestrated to work seamlessly together; the ability to pick-up, cycle, and use weapons; the (unlimited) ability to slow time; the furious death ballet of the Blood Rage; and, most importantly, two luscious ways of draining victims—via a Sub Zero-like chain-pull followed by mounting and sucking, or by clasping BloodRayne's long legs around an enemy Kraut's waste and biting into the throat. Cooler yet, while she's clasped to her prey, she can turn them towards any incoming fire—pelting them, rather than nick her shiny, skin-tight bustier (which, on Xbox, is also bump-mapped). There are no med kits in this game; the people are the med kits. Eliminating Nazi scum and slicing their parasitic mutants to ribbons is what it's all about, for the most part. Although there are mild puzzles to solve, plenty of surprises, and enough plot to drive the action, for the most part, you're in the hunt from start to finish. Adding a well-balanced mix of search-and-destroy gameplay and the element of feeding, with a heroine as easy to connect with as BloodRayne, well, the guilty pleasure abounds. Real-time cinemas link the action, and although the models aren't perfect, the dialogue is, overall, written well and, save for a few slightly corny one-liners, well-acted—even the German accents.

BloodRayne is rated M for more reasons than the buckets of blood spilled (which stays on the ground along with body parts—yum). I welled up every time she said "f—ker" or went into her slow-motion death dance after killing a particularly high-rankling official. Unlike most female action heroes, BloodRayne's bite is actually much worse than her bark, and Terminal Reality pulls no punches. Trix are for kids, but *BloodRayne* is not.

So, is there a new girl in town? I'd have to say, most definitely, yes. If *BloodRayne* doesn't get your blood boiling, you may want to check your CD collection for Streisand's greatest hits. **play**

Suck them, spin them, drain them, kill them. Agent Bloodrayne always wastes her food.

"I welled up every time she said 'f—ker' or went into her slow-motion death dance."

bloodrayne

play rating

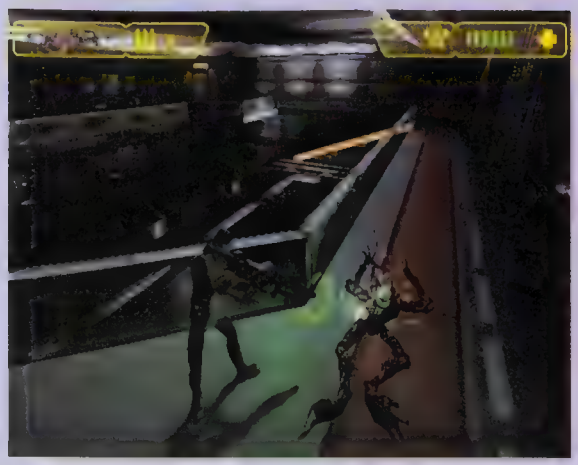
XB PS2 GC

developer: **terminal reality** / publisher: **majesco** / available: **halloween**

BloodRayne really came together in the end. Terminal Reality and Majesco deserve major props for creating one of gamings most sensual babes, and a great game around her

RUN LIKE HELL

words brady fiechter



My sense of wonder runs wild when I see a compelling image of far distant stars and spaceships, giant futuristic colonies and floating research stations. Menacing aliens running around, leaving a trail of chaos and destruction also gets the thumbs up. Agree? Then escape to the world of *Run Like Hell*, an atmospheric, action-intense and strongly story-driven adventure set in a space station overrun by hordes of really nasty creatures that chase, explode, make lots of noise and thirst for blood – all the nuts and bolts of the genre.

For a game that has been in development for several years and has undergone some changes along the way, *Run Like Hell* came with certain expectations. It is rough around the edges and doesn't quite bring its cool ideas to the forefront nearly as well as it should have, but the involving puzzles, good story, exceptional voice acting—invested by known actors such as Lance Henriksen from *Aliens* and *Millennium*, adds appeal—and heated action work well enough to adequately propel the experience. And while it isn't a technical powerhouse, *Run Like Hell* paints its sci-fi visions compellingly through inspired designs and rich imagery.

I liked *Run Like Hell*, and there were plenty of surprises that kept me going, but sloppy moments, revealed immediately in the choppy cut-scenes, pull it down from the top tier. **play**

"*Run Like Hell* paints its sci-fi visions compellingly through inspired designs..."

Sometimes you run like hell, sometimes you shoot like hell, sometimes you just slow down and listen to the story.

run like hell — **play rating**

PS2

developer: **digital mayham** / publisher: **universal** / available: **now**

Run Like Hell does not fail to deliver an involving, atmospheric adventure despite its clunky qualities.

GET READY TO RUBBLE

There's a new fight in town and this time it's huge. Take command of 120ft. tall, fully armored, fully loaded Megamites and stop the apocalyptic Volgaru invasion from rampaging through our cities. If that means you have to knock down a few buildings and crush some pedestrians, well, such is the price of victory. We didn't say it would be easy to save the world, but hey, nothing ever is.

RAD

ROBOT ALCHEMIC DRIVE

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood
Violence

PlayStation.2

ENIX

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The journey begins...

THE LORD OF THE RINGS

THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING

words dave halverson

I can only imagine the developers responsible for creating the videogame versions of *Fellowship of the Ring* sitting in the theater thinking, "What the heck have we gotten ourselves into?" Because let's face it, if you make a bad *Lord of the Rings* game, your chances of being publicly stoned (with rocks) in the town square greatly increase. I mean, it's only one of the best films ever made, with a following that holds it in hallowed esteem as a childhood-altering story... so, no pressure. That said, who the heck is WXP, and how on Middle Earth did they get this gig? Well, they're a "talented staff that hails from a variety of top-tier game development companies across North America" (got that right off the website). Regardless, they have risen to the occasion and produced a game worthy of the legendary Tolkien namesake. For these proceedings, I'll be covering the Xbox version, which is designed along the same lines, but different from the PS2 version in many ways. I booted up both and played side by side to decide which would go first, and at least visually, the Xbox game turned my PS2 a shade of green. These days if you don't own an Xbox... well, you definitely need one; there are parts of *Fellowship* that look so lavish, I simply can't believe it. The level of detail at work here is darn near unprecedented: in-game models have subtle facial movements, wrinkles, eyelids, teeth, and hair, and the wardrobe is authentically re-created down to the thread count. Then there are the environments.

The integrity of the in-game models combined with the background detail deliver a surprisingly Tolkien-esque experience overall.

"The level of detail at work here is darn near unprecedented."

It's hard to justifiably overload the Xbox enough to interrupt frame-rates, but WXP does, and you won't care in the least (well, you may a little). Mountain paths, quaint villages, brooks, rolling hills around the shire, Mordor—all are accented by exceptional texture work and truly wonderful skylines. You'd be hard-pressed to find a game as lush and gorgeous as this overall. I know I said that about *Star Fox Adventures*, too, so forgive me—both games have made me weep openly.

The gameplay, which trades off characters as the story deems, has all the requisite adventuring amenities, like exploration, puzzle-solving, lots of combat, and tasks that trigger events (and a few surprises). Riding on a dual-menu system, which places your inventory on corresponding shoulder buttons (weapons on the left and quest items on the right), the action is delivered via the now-standard-issue lock-on system with the ability to block and attack from a distance with projectiles. Unfortunately, the characters often get jammed circling enemies and there is nary a roll move in sight, but this minor annoyance serves as the game's only flaw. The gameplay, which is woven into a skillfully executed real-time story, is mostly compelling stuff due to the ever-changing landscapes, characters, and predicaments throughout the game. The Ring itself factors into the equation quite a bit as well.

Where die-hard fans will appreciate the book version of *Fellowship* the most, however, is in the character designs (human, elf, orc, troll, hobbit, Ringwraiths, on down the line) and the story integration; what I like about it as a fan and as a gamer is that, first and foremost, it's a quality adventure. I haven't played the EA game yet, but they certainly have their work cut out for them. Middle Earth sure is a busy place these days. **play**

the lord of the rings: the fellowship of the ring

play rating

XB

developer: **wxp** / publisher: **black label games** / available: **now**

The first console game in the *Lord of the Rings* saga is a triumph. Next month we'll take a look at the PS2 version. Xbox fans are already in good hands.

TOEJAM & EARL III

MISSION TO EARTH

words dave halverson

Among the many things that make *ToeJam & Earl III: Mission to Earth* stand out in the crowd—it's different. Not different like rock is to hip-hop, but more like rock is to, say, an old Buick. It was different on 16-bit, but seeing as how no one has made anything like it since while gaming has shot up around it, it's even stranger now. None of the usual videogame rules apply. Par for team TJ&E's twisted course, this series has its own parameters, all based on the power of funk, which drips from every orifice of the adventure.

The Great Funkopotamous' 12 sacred Albums of Funk have been stolen (the source of all known funk in the universe) and it's up to ToeJam, Earl, and Latisha to get them back. To do so, they'll need to convert minions of unfunky Earthlings back to the ways of funk, using Funkify Notes, Funk-Fu and a vast assortment of Presents, none of which you will ever receive for Christmas. The diversity of characters in Mission to Earth doesn't serve as merely fodder for pummeling, but rather as the catalyst for the adventure itself, since getting to the sacred albums requires, among other things, getting past them, which isn't at all easy. To name two, one Medusa baby can ruin your whole day, and crazed dentists are not only tuff as plaque, but relentless, crafty, and elusive. (I hate tornadoes.)

Without delving too much deeper into the game's heart (that being enough character balancing to turn any testers brain to mush), just know that funkify notes are a man's (or woman's) best friend. What Funk-Fu won't conquer a few properly placed Funkify Notes often will, so look for the choir when you have a few extra bucks to spend. Other than that, you're on your own. Everything we said would be in here in our August cover story is, and it works even better than we expected. It's a big, funky world out there that no two people will conquer in the same way; in fact, if you see a strategy guide for *Mission to Earth*, do yourself (and others!) a favor and hide them behind the last issue of *Rosie*.

At the end of the day (or even the beginning or the middle), *Mission to Earth* is many things—a great videogame filled with some of the most impressive visuals you'll ever see, dripping with style and oozing with funk-essence; a fan's wish come true; and perhaps most profoundly, proof that videogame designers can still think outside the box, exhibiting vision and individuality beyond the confines of the generic planning so popular in today's board rooms. I can't imagine anyone not falling in love with it. You go team TJ&E! Oh, and say "hi" to the Xbox Live guy for me... I told you so. **play**

toejam & earl III: mission to earth

play rating

XB

developer: **visual concepts** / publisher: **sega** / available: **now**

Get down, get very funky...and be very happy about your Xbox. The Boyz are back and they're packin funk!

Simply radiant

IKARUGA

words michael hobbs

"This is a short, stubby, hard as f—k arcade shooter of the highest order."

Treasure exist in their own world, don't they? Who else on earth is still expending energy on the overhead shooter? More importantly, who else is still discovering new ideas in this most classic of genres. The short answer to that is, no one.

This is a brilliant Treasure game, a perfect follow-up to *Radiant Silvergun*, that greatest of all shooters. But whereas *RS* felt more like an adventure game with its level-up system, this is a short, steely, hard as f—k arcade shooter of the highest order.

What Treasure has done with the game system is absolutely genius. Basically, they've taken the core of every shooter and turned it inside out. You don't avoid the bullets in this game, you go after them. Your ship has a dual personality, red and blue. While switched to the blue side, you can absorb blue bullets to charge your super bomb while causing the double damage to red-themed enemies. The inverse is true when you are in the red form. You switch on the fly, and there are these insane moments when you've got to use every single atom of your concentration and reflexes to swap back and forth between the two forms through streams of differently colored bullets. It's an awesome, daunting experience at times, but like all Treasure games, you can see how, with a large amount of skill, you could survive. The difficulty is insane, but there is a method to the madness. This is precise, perfect game design, not stupid difficulty.

I'm out of space, but the graphics are some of the best I've ever seen on Dreamcast, and the soundtrack is insanely great. Oh, and the game is coming to GameCube next year.

ikaruga

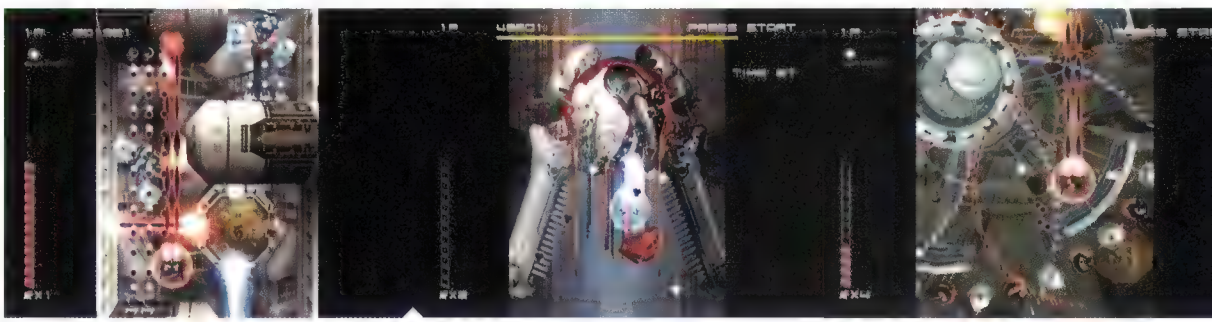
DC

japan only

developer: **treasure video games**
publisher: **(japan) esp**
available: **now**

As long as Treasure is making shooters, the world is a good place.

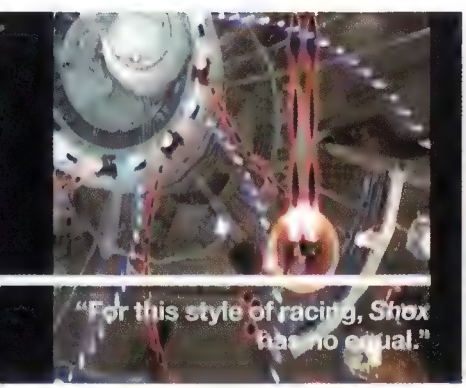
play rating



EA kicks Big ass

SHOX

words brady fiechter



I don't normally freak for snowboarding games, but *SSX* is awesome. A basketball game doesn't necessarily sit at the top of my list of must-haves, but I can't wait for a sequel to the rockin *NBA Street*. Arcade racing games often bore me, and yet *Shox* thrills me.

Shox is the latest bull's eye from EA Big, the talent behind all these games I'm not supposed to love but still can't put down. Like these other modernized, stylistically juiced sports games, *Shox* entertains with its extreme brand of gameplay, focusing on exaggerated physics, flashy graphics and kinetic presentation. It doesn't race like anything out there, anchoring the cars in a perfectly distinct look and feel. A skilled player will adopt a sound strategy, picking lines, power-sliding and hugging the turns just right, but this is certainly no traditional racing game: a "shox" meter cycles through three medals depending on your performance through checkpoints. Race fast enough and you'll amass three golds, which sends a tidal wave of energy, indefinitely consuming the course in front of you. Keeping contact with the blast enhances your speed and points earnings, which allow you to buy, upgrade, unlock and gamble for an enormous array of vehicles and tracks.

Some of the visual ideas are recycled from *SSX*, but *Shox* fiercely kicks with its own flashy, electric look. This game is big on fun, big on energy, and big on speed. For this style of racing, *Shox* has no equal.

shox

PS2

developer: **ea u.k.**
publisher: **ea**
available: **november**

Twenty-four licensed cars—like BMWs incomparable Mini Cooper—awesome visuals, rockin' style, endless addiction.

play rating

This game is not Fubar

THE THING

words dave halverson

Universal's *The Thing* for Xbox, which covers the snowy ground post-Kurt Russell's lovely Antarctic vacation, compliments the gruesome imagery and splattering of corpuscles we've come to love about this genre, with elements conducive to the film's setting. But does it work? Has AI come far enough yet to captivate us within the story? One must admire the great lengths the developers went to creating the first such engine, encompassing group management, different degrees of trust and fear, and an icon system to drive it all, and also consider whether or not this game could have existed without them. I don't think so. Ambitious projects take dedication to conquer, and in my estimation, Computer Artworks has done right by Mr. Carpenter's vision (a vision that has since blurred, hitting bottom with *Ghosts of Mars*, so let's enjoy this). Granted, the system seems a tad rudimentary at first: you have to live through a certain measure of the game before coming to appreciate the balancing act and dynamic involved in holding things together. *The Thing* is a game that takes a while to blossom, but when it does, it's bloody good stuff.

That said, it's the ambience overall that really defined the experience for me, as a huge fan of the film. While a part of me did just want to toast the mutant bastards and get back on the chopper, the fear factor certainly compliments the action elements in the game, creating a sensation as close to the film's framework as today's console AI likely allows. I guess the only question left is, how to make the sequel.

"Computer Artworks has done right by Mr. Carpenter's vision."

the thing

PS2

developer: **computer artworks**
publisher: **black label games**
available: **now**

...Does for games what it did for the movies, building tension and then splattering it all over the walls... ceiling... snow... each other...

play rating

Seriously crazy fun

SERIOUS SAM

words brady fiechter

As much as I look forward to original FPS titles like *Halo 2* and *Medal of Honor*, I'm not about to invoke my console snobbishness when a PC game makes the rounds on Microsoft's powerhouse. There is a wealth of titles just waiting to be ported—classics like *Serious Sam*. OK, for those of you who just laughed when I said "classic," you're obviously one of the haters, finding no redeeming value in *Sam*'s madness. There are just as many lovers of the game in the PC community; I've heard the game described as "brilliant." Go on, keep laughing, and let the rest of us relish the absurdity of a game that is an exercise in controlled chaos.

The premise: I don't even really know, or care. In *Serious Sam*, you shoot things, move on, shoot things, move on. Screaming warriors run at you with explosives strapped to their bodies. Buffalo beasts roll into balls and try to crush you. Giant harpies shoot and swarm in the hundreds. Maybe the thousands. Everything coming at you eventually feels like the thousands. A shotgun always works the most magic, leaving piles of flesh and racking up combo kills in the high digits.

What separates the game from most other first-person shoots is the vastness of the staging area, where you have to contend with the onslaught in the open range. It's quite impressive just how voluminous the settings are, even if they are drab. It's not about visuals; it's about a throwback to *Doom* with a balls-out style that is outrageous fun.

"...balls-out style that is outrageous fun."

The environments are incredibly wide open and filled with action.

serious sam

PS2

developer: **croteam**
publisher: **gotham games**
available: **now**

The game's wide-open spaces, crazy pace and manic enemy aggression make *Serious Sam* a unique and adrenaline-soaked rush.

play rating

Not so grand

GRANDIA XTREME

words michael hobbs

"The game's battles are simply the best in the turn-based bunch."

GX's overworlds, which are small by PS2 standards and simplistic in both architecture and detail, are plagued by almost unheard of redraw, and once inside the dungeons the same applies. This wouldn't be so bad, I suppose, if the lead character moved properly, but he is the most wooden and awkwardly animated character in recent memory, a puzzling attribute for a GA-developed product. These aspects, along with archaic water and fire effects, strike me as especially odd, given the majesty of *Grandia II* on Dreamcast. Graduating to the game's battles, the exact opposite applies. They are simply the best in the turn-based bunch—no loading, gorgeous, perfect menu, and never dull. And if you like to tinker with characters, *GX* is heaven. Game Arts has added so many different elements to the mix, both assignable and earned, that team management is like a bottomless pit. But it's a pit you'll need to traverse for many hours, because nothing is left to chance battling the game's hard-as-nails bosses, which wouldn't be so bad if the dungeons themselves—leading to the amazing showdowns—weren't so poorly executed. They put in puzzles, but for some reason, feel compelled to reveal them as you go with big, blinking neon arrows and big, yellow exclamation points. I've never seen such out of place and un-needed on-screen prompts. As a dungeon RPG, *GX* is unfortunate; it's almost sad when you think of what it could have been if the entire game was given the loving caress massaged into the battles and celebrity voices.

grandia xtreme

PS2

developer: **game arts**
publisher: **enix**
available: **october**

Oh, how I wish this game was more polished outside of the battles. *GX* could have been great, but instead it's a real conundrum

play rating

She's a killer... queen

SUMMONER 2

words brady fiechter

"Animation-wise, what's here is nice, and the models are very good."

Cold on the heels of *Summoner*, the adventure RPG that set the benchmark for near-sighted fade-in and sleep-inducing real-time combat, *Summoner 2* looks, feels, and sounds like a completely new game, because, well, it is. Redesigned from the desk up, *S2* takes us on an epic journey to fulfill an ancient prophecy through a very well-acted, character-driven story played out in real-time and in excellent CG cinemas. Playing as Maia, the Queen of Halassar, some of the best moments happen between stages, as you actually rule the kingdom from the palace, holding court, dispensing funds for growth, and seeking guidance. Setting out, Maia is joined by eight unique characters in different stages throughout the adventure, assembled in teams of three, each dispensing tailor-able attacks, spell-casting, and other attributes as you see fit for each segment of the game. The scenarios themselves play well, look surprisingly good, and feature swell progression. The problems lie in the games lock-on fighting system, which doesn't allow enough movement to be effective, and all of the character's limited animation schemes. The lack of a quick-turn and solid lock-on system really hurt it. If only Volition had administered a similar system to *Ocarina* or *Star Fox Adventure*'s, *S2* would be hard to resist. Animation-wise, what's here is nice, and the models are very good, but Maia especially needs more variety; her connectivity to the environments is definitely lacking and she desperately needs to lean when she turns—she runs in an upright pivot for the entire game. Those fairly serious hitches aside, especially given its roots, *Summoner 2* is quite an

summoner 2

PS2

developer: **volition**
publisher: **thq**
available: **now**

You really have to admire what Volition has done with this series, taking it from zero to hero in under three years. With a little more polish, this is a great game.

play rating

play online

Microsoft has revealed the details of its Xbox Live Starter Kit, which should be in stores as you read this. Included in the $49.95 kit will be everything you need to get your Xbox online. First is a one year subscription to the service. Unlike Sony's current online scenario, you have to pay to be on Xbox Live. But for the time being, it's a far more compelling online environment. You can use a single user name and password through all your games, making setting up each title a snap. And downloadable content should be available right from the start, and for the future, this means new game levels and even playable demos. Not until Sony gets their hard drive out will anything approaching this be possible.

As on the Xbox Live Starter Kit will be the very cool microphone and headset [illegible] the primary interface of your Xbox 360, and it features a volume control and mute button. Nothing that could be very easily [illegible] SOCOM.

To get you started playing right away, a few popular demos [illegible] possible, more will be included with the Starter Kit. "Knockout" kit, featuring a handful of playable levels and "Free Gift" add-on, also rolls along a small selection of classics. But what's really great is that the Xbox 360 demos will spoil the game protocol of the full game released earlier this year. So if you've already got *Metal Gear* this demo will make that game Live compatible.

Pretty cool.

socom: u.s. navy seals

[illegible] zipper interactive / [illegible] sony / [illegible] now

PS2

[illegible]

[illegible] *SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs* [illegible]

[illegible] SEALs or terrorists through a [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

xbox headset

Real-time voice exchange can be enjoyed in games like *MechAssault* with Microsoft's headset.

Just because this is an online game doesn't mean it can't look great. Effects abound and the mechs look awesome.

mechassault

[redacted] microsoft [redacted] november

XB

[redacted]

just announced...

true fantasy online

[redacted] level five / [redacted] microsoft / [redacted] 2003

XB

[redacted]

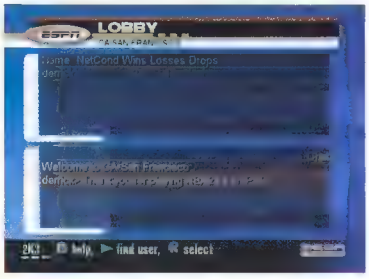
[redacted]

NBA 2K3

play rating ●●●○○

GC PS2 XB

developer: **visual conepts** / publisher: **sega sports** / available: **october**



Without question, *NBA 2K2* was the best basketball game last year. Showcasing great visuals and a plethora of features, Sega almost sunk this '03 update, too. Alas, it has been beaten. With competition becoming more intense, fans want more than mere roster updates or tweaked AI—they want to be wowed. Aside from a few aesthetic changes (namely the addition of ESPN signage and logos throughout the game and presentation), *2K3* plays a lot like last year's game—which isn't necessarily a bad thing. Control has always been a strongpoint of the Sega Sports brand, and *NBA 2K3* continues this tradition. Rebounding is now a much more controlled action rather than a random move, and the low post game has been greatly improved so players can now change direction mid-move. When used together with a juke move, it makes for a devastating combination. The franchise mode is extremely comprehensive and, in my opinion, the best of the bunch. Although, the player models look better than they do in EA's game, the movements aren't as fluid. Some of the animations (especially passing) are a little awkward. However, in the online arena, *NBA 2K3* is the only third-party b-ball romp with network play on PS2 and Xbox.

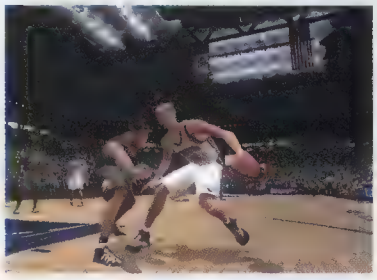
Tom Ham

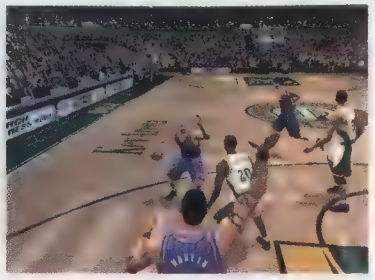
NBA Live 2003

play rating ●●●●●

GC PS2 XB PC

developer: **ea sports** / publisher: **ea sports** / available: **october**





After getting their asses handed to them last year, EA Sports went back to their roots and have brought the *NBA Live* series back to where it used to be—on top. EA has not only improved on last year's shortcomings, but has implemented new gameplay enhancements that truly make *Live 2003* the *only* basketball game to own this year. Debuting in this '03 renewal is the EA Sports "freestyle" control. Without question, it *will* change the way you play basketball games...forever. With simple movements of the right analog stick, players are now able to execute advanced moves never before seen in a videogame (palming the ball on the outer perimeter, step-back moves, shoulder fakes, spins, and, of course, the killer crossover). When used in combination with the left stick, players are able to execute post-up moves and drive down the lane with incredible finesse. Add new dribbling animations and player signature moves, what you're left with is a b-ball game that truly excites. Plus, with respect to AI, it has been improved significantly. CPU players are more effective on fast breaks and three-point opportunities. Throw in online gameplay (only PS2), fantastic graphics and a killer soundtrack, and *NBA Live 2003* is nothing but net.

Tom Ham

NHL 2003

play rating ●●●○○

GC PS2 XB

developer: **ea sports**/ publisher: **ea sports** / available: **october**

Of all the sports games under the EA label, you can always count on one franchise that continually exceeds my expectations: *NHL*—and for 2003, EA hasn't pulled any punches. It's all about the "deke" control system, folks, making puck control much easier. Players can use the right analog stick in conjunction with the left to execute fake shots, trick shots and even pass the puck *around* a defender. Much like *Live*'s "freestyle" add-on, this new control scheme makes for some incredible-looking shots. However, my favorite new feature is the "game breaker." As players showboat to the crowd by performing well-executed fakes, trick shots and of course, killer body checks, the "GB" meter increases. Building it up enough allows you to activate a bullet-time mode (which you control), slowing the action (*Max Payne*-style). As always, the graphics in *NHL 2003* are exceptional, especially on the Xbox. There were times when I thought I was watching an actual hockey game. And for all you sound buffs out there, this '03 version supports DTS on PS2, Dolby 5.1 on Xbox and Pro Logic on GameCube. Unfortunately, there is no online gameplay—period. This is simulation hockey at its best.

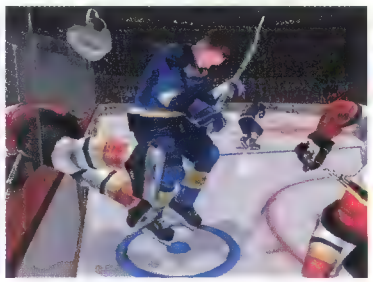
Tom Ham

NHL Hitz 2003

play rating ●●●●○

GC PS2 XB

developer: **black box games** / publisher: **midway** / available: **now**



Midway has once again raised the bar for arcade-steeped sports games with their latest, *NHL Hitz 20-03,* a follow-up to last year's hit title. Midway has taken an already proven formula for hard-hitting action and added cool new gameplay elements that give this *Hitz* incredible replay value. Taking center stage is the all-new "franchise" mode. Here, you can create a team (of up to 11) of customized players and then take them on a world tour. As you win games and tournament round matches, cool stuff begins to unlock—new gear, equipment, stadiums, player models. As you gain experience, players' attributes can be upgraded (think of it as a hockey RPG). This feature alone will keep you busy for hours. Plus, the graphics have been overhauled; the arenas show off nice reflective surfaces and crowd animations, and the new player animations are top notch. Although the textures are smoother on the Xbox version, surprisingly, the game plays faster on the PS2. Go figure. And from an audio standpoint, *Hitz 20-03* delivers tenfold. The soundtrack packs songs from Rob Zombie, Incubus and Moby, just to name a few. Throw in hilarious play-by-play commentary and excellent sound effects, and *Hitz 20-03* is a great alternative to simulation hockey.

Tom Ham

Chicks really dig the trees...

and you'll love the scenery too because the babes from the million-selling fighting game, **Dead or Alive®3** are back! This time, they're setting aside their fighting gear for some **fun-in-the-sun** swimwear and turning up the heat in **Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball™**. This is no ordinary volleyball game - this is volleyball to the extreme with **great gameplay** and **mind-blowing realism**. You'll be able to feel the sand between your toes and the gentle ocean breeze as you compete in the **most outrageous beach volleyball game yet!** Points earned on the court allow you to customize your babe off of it, with **over 100** different **swimsuits** and **accessories** to choose from. But when the day is done, the fun has just begun! This first ever "**Sports Fantasy Simulation**" boasts a variety of different **nightlife** activities to choose from. Whatever your pleasure, **Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball** promises **extreme action** and a **whole lotta satisfaction!**

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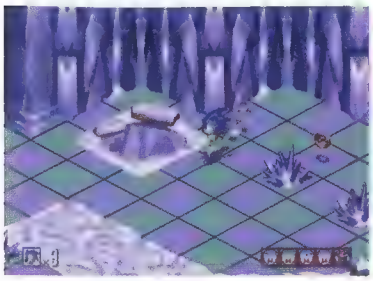
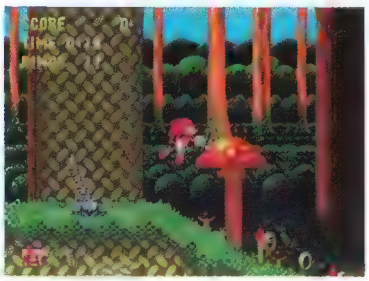
Sonic Mega Collection

play rating ●●●◐○

GC

developer: **sega** / publisher: **sega** / available: **now**





Some easy fixes would have made *Sonic Mega Collection* a celebration rather than a somewhat-missed opportunity. The import version of the original *Sonic the Hedgehog* had an independently scrolling sky, which they obviously have, so what gives? Absent, and it makes a big difference. The reason *Sonic Blast* never took off was because it's a huge game with no save feature so, why not implement one? Absent! And lastly and most importantly, they finally had the chance to release *Sonic CD* with the import soundtrack! Absent! Sonic CD isn't even on the disc. Why, Sega, why? Oh well, you brought back *Shinobi, Gungrave* is heavy-metal bliss, *Jet Set Future* and *Gunvalkyrie* are gifts from above, *TJ&E III* is funk-a-liscious, and *Panzer* is coming! *Sonic Collection* will scab over... and it's still nice to have so much hog heaven in one place... grumble, grumble.

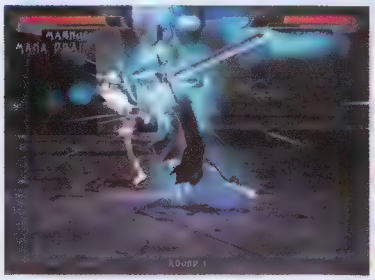
Dave Halverson

Barbarian

play rating ●●●◐○

XB

developer: **saffire** / publisher: **titus** / available: **now**



As it was on the PS2, so it is on the Xbox, picking up some added resolution in the transition. *Barbarian* is an open-environment fighter with hot (and nearly naked) deadly babes, fierce warriors, and nasty demons all vying for supremacy, linked together by story chains and build-as-you-win attributes, giving you reign over speed, defense, power, regenerative skills, etc. What's really worth bragging about, however, are the game's most important elements: the environments and characters, along with the visuals on display depicting both. This is, without a doubt, one of the prettiest fighters around, packed with seamless models applied to superb character design. The fighting system is from the speed-vs.-brawn school, magnified as the attributes seep into play, accompanied by a simplistic yet very effective control scheme dispensing magic usage, blocking, combos and, of course, running for cover among the massive, tiered levels. A sequel with real-time story elements and further implementation of the team's original role-playing vision would be a worthwhile endeavor.

Dave Halverson

Godzilla: Destroy All Monsters Melee

play rating ●●●◐○

GC

developer: **pipeworks studios** / publisher: **infogrames** / available: **now**

As far as creating an arena-style fighting game based on the true Japanese Godzilla, little more than what's here could be expected. Save for details that would have taken more time and/or polygons to implement, the spirit of the greatest guy-in-a-rubber-suit sci-fi is certainly honored in this hard to put down, epic-feeling monster war. Working in tandem with the game's balance and interactive environments, the gist of the gameplay is getting to know your monster (hey now, you know what I mean) and properly using its strengths to exploit your opposition's weaknesses. Sure, that can be said about pretty much any fighting game, but with these big mothers, attributes are especially key. Balanced between projectiles, running and dodging, and claw to, er, whatever combat, together with the interactive environments, *Melee* is at least—for now—the top dog in large-scale fighting. The fact that it's covered with melted Japanese cheese is merely icing on the cake. And it looks pretty great, too.

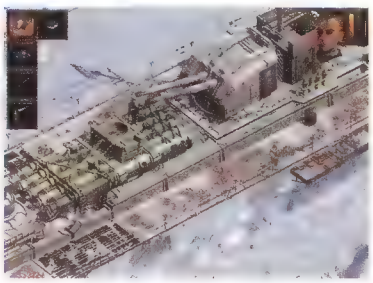
Dave Halverson

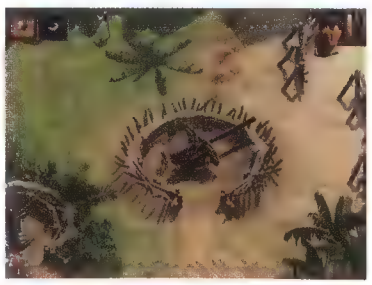
Commandos 2

play rating ●●●◐○

PS2 XB

developer: **pyro studios** / publisher: **eidos** / available: **now**





Any PC game receiving the call of duty on console is going to have to work overtime to grab our attention when it is as complicated and heavy-handed as *Commandos 2*. To its credit, the game is a lushly detailed, authentically structured tapestry of the first World War, rendered down to the coolest little touches. The action moves across several foreign cities and countries, with some settings inspired by war films. The music is also very well done, airy and consistently establishing mood. But sink into the action and you sink into bouts of tedium. Calling out the troops is too convoluted, requiring you to manage and control an array of allies in an awkward and far-too-PC interface. It feels like a point-and-click exercise *way* too much of the time, even when the console sensibilities attempt to carry the experience. *Commandos 2* is not a poorly constructed game at all, but more of an esoteric offering for the console gamer with exceptional patience and desire for a game that demands meticulous strategy.

Brady Fiechter

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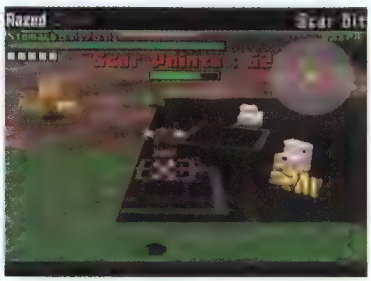
Cubivore: Survival of the Fittest

play rating ●●●●○

GC

developer: **saru brunai** / publisher: **atlus** / available: **now**



Question: Can a game starring a weird cube and 3D graphics from the Jaguar era (save for the textures) be any good? Oddly enough, the answer is yes—to put it mildly. Not knowing what to expect, I initially thought it was a prank. Oh, how cute, after this they'll jump in with all the next-gen stuff... er, or not. So, here's this odd little box talking to me and dragging itself around—eating stuff and just getting weirder. Two hours later—transfixed—I finally heard a loud noise or something and snapped out of it. It was as if I'd traveled back in time and was playing *Wild Pure Simple Life* again on the PlayStation. These oddball "survival of the fittest" games don't happen often, but, when they do, it's like we get to feel the drugs they were on when they made them; so since I don't do drugs (and neither should you!), games like *Cubivore* serve a higher purpose. Yeah, right, what a bunch of malarkey that was. See what it's done to me?

Dave Halverson

Whirl Tour

play rating ●●●○○

GC

developer: **papaya studio** / publisher: **crave** / available: **now**

When a hard rockin' punk band is sucked off stage into a parallel dimension, the first thing that comes to my mind is going after them on a scooter, of course. In *Whirl Tour*, the band's roadie does just that, as Papaya applies the *T. Hawk* formula to fantasy worlds similar to *Aggressive Inline's*, only with an array of scooters and (unlockable) characters at your disposal. The proof is in the playing. *Whirl Tour* looks and controls right up there with the best of the over-crowded bunch, but its scooter vibe and rocker storyline give it a fresh edge; and the in-between-level races to save "Flipside" band members are a cool twist. With a total of seven playable characters, ten scooters and eight levels, there's enough shredding for the long haul; and on the trick side, between "huge" and "sick," there are over 85 in all. That ought to keep the skate rat in you busy for a while.

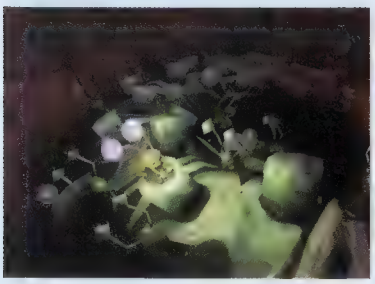
Shane Reed

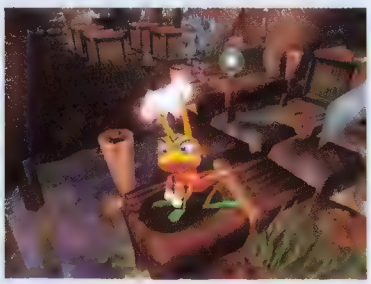
Zapper

play rating ●●●○○

PS2 GC XB

developer: **blitz games** / publisher: **infogrames** / available: **now**





Well now, what's this? *Frogger*-inspired game that replaces the frog with a cricket? Irony here? A better game than *Frogger* here? Much better—at least, immensely more enjoyable than the *3D Frogger*'s of late. In *Zapper*, you take your colorful friend through colorful obstacle courses composed of water, fire, spikes, falling platforms, moving platforms, moving objects, and anything else that might kill an insect trying to jump and zap with electrified tentacles to the finish line. Zapper moves in 90 degree quadrants, feeling a lot like, yes, *Frogger*, with your timing instincts tickled to the point of insanity. I liked *Zapper* for its utterly old-school approach to simplicity and twitch-based gameplay, even if it could have been a little better on all fronts. This game isn't magic, but it is a great game to pick up for a few minutes at a time and drip sweat onto the controller.

Brady Fiechter

Burnout 2

play rating ●●●●○

PS2

developer: **criterion** / publisher: **acclaim** / available: **now**

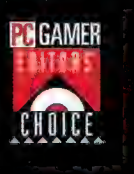
The racing game for crazy people is as fast and furious as ever this year. Newly added "Defensive Driving 101" trains you on how to become a maniac—instructing you on performing near misses, driving on the wrong side of the road, and other tips from the Halle Barry school of driving—and then it's on to championship mode where you'll feast on visual bliss as you go ape shit among heavy traffic, racing four other drivers as insane as you are, hot dog (that is, when you're not the cop, laying down the law like Adam 12 on a Krispy Kreme high)!. The locales, especially coastal routes, must be driven to be appreciated, the control is sticky and ultra precise, and the amount of depth, given the unlockable nature of the cars and missions, make this as meaty as it is intense.

Dave Halverson

Computer Games Magazine (Editors' Choice)

Computer Gaming World (Editors' Choice)

PC Gamer (Editors Choice)



"...a PC gaming classic for the Ages."

95 out of 100

PC Gamer

"The DM Client and tools elevate Neverwinter Nights into a creative medium of expression"

4.5 out of 5

Computer Gaming World

www.neverwinternights.com

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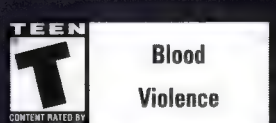

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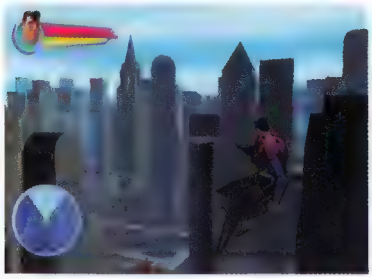
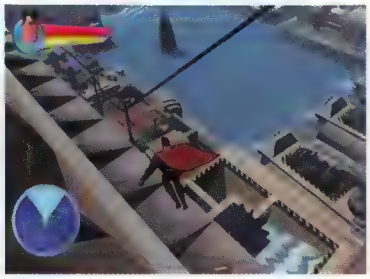
Superman: Shadow of Apokolips

play rating ●●◐○○

PS2

developer: **sheffield house** / publisher: **atari** / available: **now**





Superman: Shadow of Apokolips can be summed rather easily: great in the air, bad on the ground. Playing as Clark Kent especially, the game melts down. His paddling run animation (made to endeavor stealth and timing maneuvers amidst an engine that just says "no") could be better (a lot better), and regardless of the mission you're beaten over the head with what to do next. "Maybe if I push-break those crates, I'll find the fuse." Superman's ground assaults are far better than Clark's, but there is still a pervading lack of connectivity to the environs, which themselves are impressive. Once airborne, however, the game soars, with a wonderful sense of freedom and an excellent portrayal of Superman's trademark flight patterns. The story elements, too, deliver; in fact, they couldn't be better. It's a mixed bag for Superman fans, but given the license's past history, one giant step in the right direction.

Dave Halverson

Gungrave

play rating ●●●●○

PS2

developer: **red** / publisher: **sega** / available: **now**

Reviewed once already in our September issue, this is just a friendly reminder that you need *Gungrave*. Why? Because the guy's dead and he's still kickin' ass, that's why. Need more reasons? Artistically, the game is like a moving art gallery—hard-core and beautiful all at the same time, with character designs by esteemed anime artisan Yasuhiro Naito (*Trigun*). What's it all about? Revenge, of course, and saving a city from a very evil crime syndicate.

Dusting bad guys increases *Grave*'s "beat count," filling his "demolition gauge" (used to unleash four unholy special attacks that could stop a tank—but these are people, so imagine the fun). Arcade style action and shooting just doesn't get any better. Pick away at environments like they're paper, go on a murderous rampage against the scum of the Earth, and be home in time for dinner.

Dave Halverson

The House of the Dead 3

play rating ●●●●◐

XB

developer: **sega wow** / publisher: **sega** / available: **now**

It's all too easy to invoke the "best ever" phrase to give impact to an observation about a game. Does anyone even believe it when you say it about a particular aspect of a game? Well, I don't care because I'm going to use it, and you can take it to the bank. *The House of the Dead 3* is the *best* looking light gun game I have *ever* seen. This thing is astounding. The lighting, textures, environments, and especially the monsters are simply stunning to look at. But it gets better. The game itself is an absolute marvel. This is great light gun design, with brilliant scenes of explosive shooting action and enemies popping up out of all sorts of interesting places. The visceral thrill of the game is huge as you blow holes through and chunks out of the amazing looking enemies. It's almost too much to take. Almost.

As an added bonus, levels from *House of the Dead 2* are available, as well as a behind the scenes look at the *HOTD* movie, which is shaping up to be one of the greatest tragedies of filmmaking the world has yet seen. You will not believe this footage when you see it. Enjoy the show.

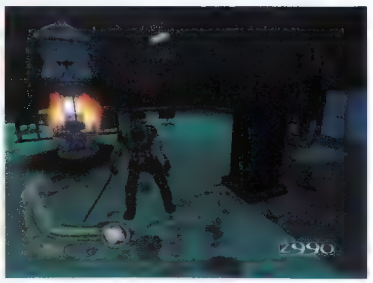
Michael Hobbs

Blade II

play rating ●●●○○

PS2 XB

developer: **mucky foot** / publisher: **activision** / available: **now**



My skepticism laid to rest, I found myself liking *Blade II* a lot more than I anticipated based on the preview build. Granted, Blade still moves on a pivot, has a funky jump, a slow strafe, and no quick turn, but these don't conspire against the games action all that much, thanks to the slick visual presentation, nicely balanced action, the group battle system, and quality level design. Between the two versions, the Xbox Blade dawns a cool cape at the outset and appears leaner, so, I'll take it; although, they're mostly identical otherwise. Whistler's a goof, and the one-liners are served with double cheese, but such fodder is par for the movie course. *Blade II*'s got enough meat flyin', head choppin', body-disintegrating action to fill any daywalker's dance card along with some cool beats and beautiful interiors.

Dave Halverson

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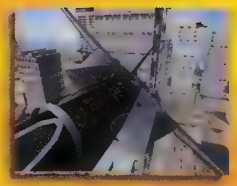

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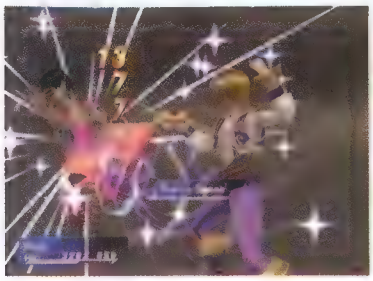
Legend of Legaia 2: Dual Saga

play rating ●●◐○○

PS2

developer: **contrail** / publisher: **eidos** / available: **now**



When *Legend of Legaia* was introduced on the PlayStation, it existed in the company of some very stiff competition. While not the prettiest link in the consistently growing RPG chain, *Legaia* was entertaining for its unique battle system, but troubles with a coherent story left much room for improvement on a sequel. Here's the sequel, but where's the improvement? Once again, a stilted story of amnesia, magic, and finding the meaning of existence plague the more positive points, the highest being, once again, the entertaining battle system. Most everything in *Legaia 2: Dual Saga* is fairly traditional and holds few surprises, but pounding out combos through complex button inputs that correspond with the icons on-screen is a very rewarding way to lay waste to the evil of the land. Unfortunately, this evil isn't very menacing in its design, keeping with the bland, average look that pervades the game—a casual sequel to a mediocre original.

Brady Fiechter

Top Gun: Combat Zones

play rating ●●●○○

GC

developer: **digital integration** / publisher: **titus** / available: **now**

Somewhat underrated and overlooked, if you missed *Top Gun*'s first fly-by ("I want some butts!"), now's the time to embark on this richly devised, arcade-style, mission-based flier. The tuning issues associated with the PS2 version have been ironed out and the overall presentation—frame-rate, control, balance, etc.—have all been aptly tweaked for the GameCube version. While Goose, Maverick, the Iceman, etc., are nowhere in sight, the spirit of *Top Gun* certainly shines through, thanks to a Michael Ironside impersonation, slick replays and strategically placed '80s rock that would make any Winger fan pop a wood. The missions deliver superb flying action between obliterating bogies and ground targets, and there are enough fighter jets in tow to make any wannabe fly boy whip out the old VHS. Airborne '80s nostalgia just doesn't get any better, especially since there is none.

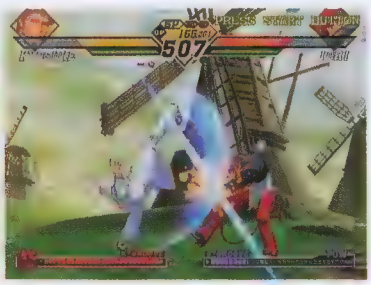
Shane Reed

Capcom vs. SNK 2: EO

play rating ●●●◐○

GC

developer: **capcom** / publisher: **capcom** / available: **now**



Nintendo consoles have never offered an inviting home for fighting games, but that doesn't mean we don't want the opportunity to play the best of what Namco, Tecmo, Capcom and other premier brawling companies have to offer. Yet Nintendo pads have never been hospitable to the precision movement of a fighter, which is the core of *Capcom vs. SNK 2: EO*'s problem—the GameCube controller becomes a bit of a struggle when the 2D moves must be engaged at the blink of an eye. But the more you play, the more you can acclimate yourself to the game and quickly sink into the joys of one of Capcom's best. The game could be criticized for lacking the kind of fluid animations possible with today's technology, but the overall presentation is still terrifically appealing, with crazy energy, high style and distinct *SF* artistry flooding the screen. And in the end, the cornucopia of stages and fighters, underpinned by the perfectly honed combat, satisfies for months.

Brady Fiechter

Big Air Freestyle

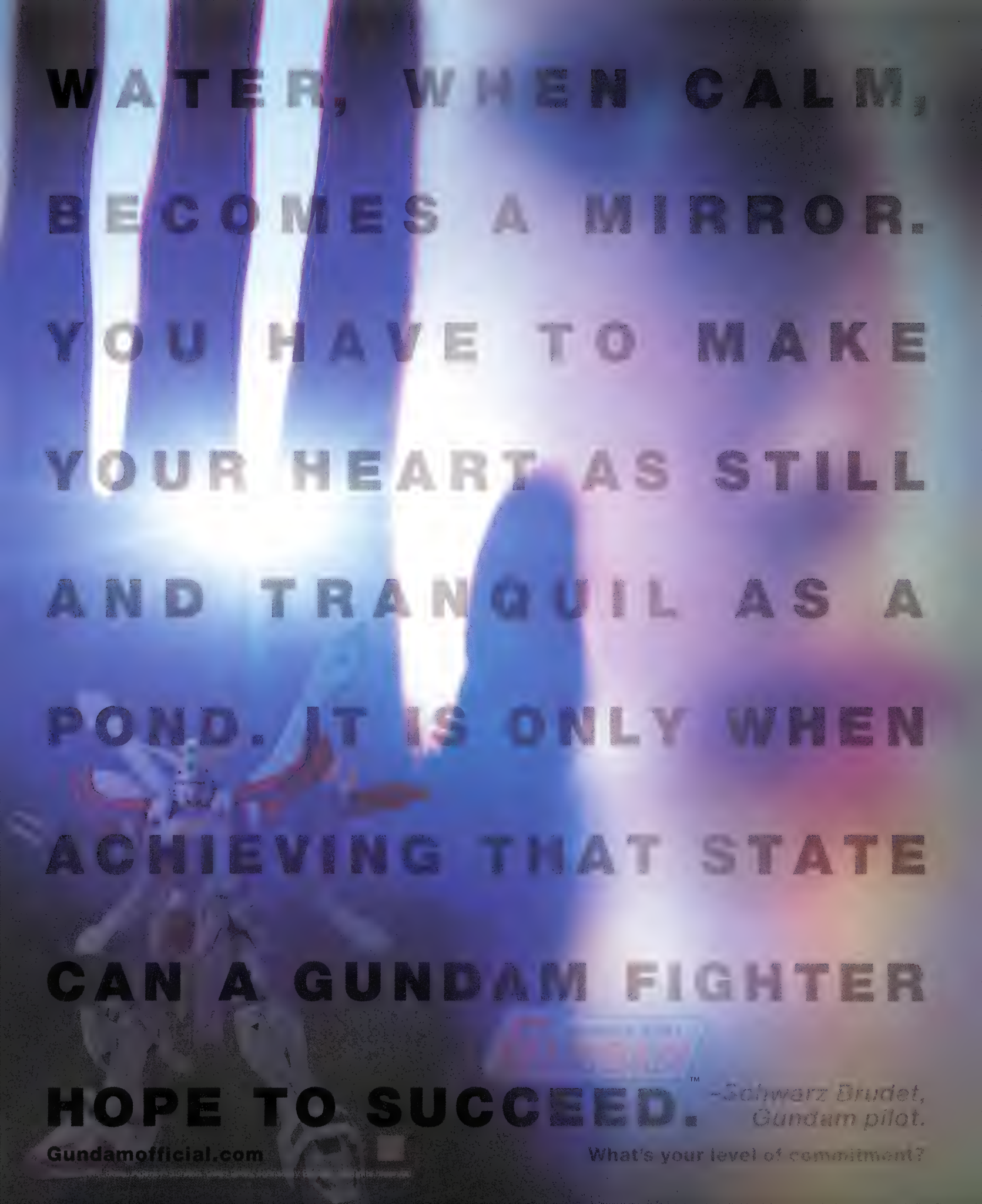
play rating ●●●◐○

GC

developer: **paradigm** / publisher: **infogrames** / available: **now**

For the 'Cube version of *Big Air Freestyle* (renamed from the PS2 game, *MX Rider*), Paradigm has added freestyle elements for obvious reasons. The buzzword for MX games, it's a right of passage into the Wal-Marts of the world alright, but the game, being a true racer at heart, really doesn't need or benefit from tricks that are obvious afterthoughts. What we have here is a solid—if not great—motocross game, with real-time dirt accumulation, the best behind-the-bars view in the business, and excellent track design, tweaked in all the right places since its PS2 debut. The controls, sans pre-loading, clutch work, etc., are a tad bare-boned, but work extremely well in the scheme of things with the emphasis placed more on cornering and picking the right lines for optimum speed. Since this year's *Carmichael* was too stiff to gel as a proper sequel, this is the current game to beat in its class.

Dave Halverson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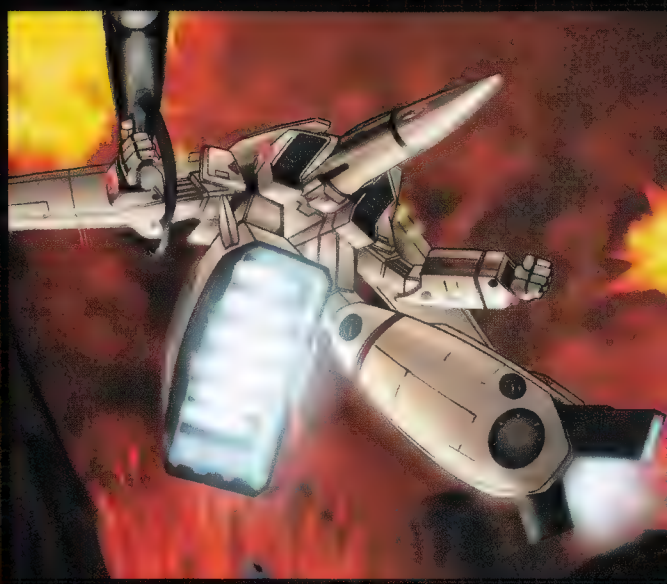

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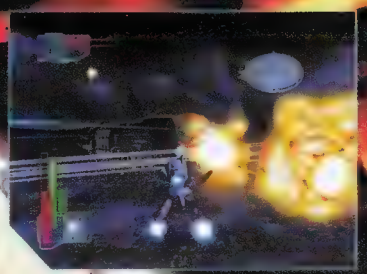

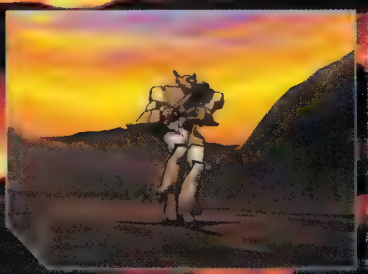

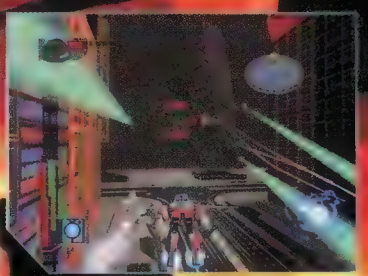

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devfile: surreal software

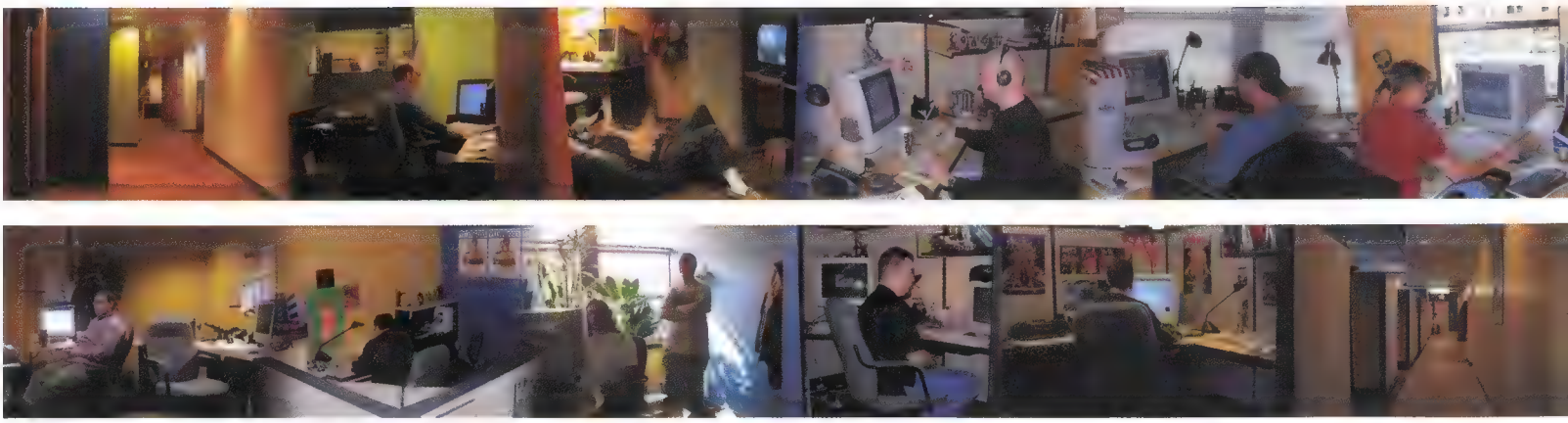
Questions answered by **Richard Rouse III**, designer and programmer on *Drakan: The Ancients' Gates*.

Ever wonder what happens after a game is shipped, and then after that? We take you inside the hallowed halls of dragon town as Surreal Software shifts its focus from one epic to another, in the first of our new devfile series.

Take us through the conceptual stages. How do you decide what's next, and once you say "okay, we're going to make *Drakan* 2," what are the steps that lead up to actually beginning to program.

Richard Rouse III: As we were nearing the end of development on the original *Drakan: Order of the Flame* for the PC, the game had been getting a lot of great press and Psygnosis, publisher of the game, realized they had a hit on their hands. As a result, they wanted us to start working on a sequel as soon as possible. So, interestingly enough, *Drakan: The Ancients Gates* started in development before the first game was completed, though the game we started developing doesn't bear much resemblance to the game we ended up shipping. As the first title Surreal had developed, everyone on the team felt attached to *Drakan* and were definitely happy to continue to expand the universe and establish a potential franchise. Plus, game sequels are good because they give a developer the opportunity to reassess the original game design, see what worked and what didn't, fix the problems, and make the new game even better. Of course, since the first title hadn't shipped yet, that was tricky to do, but over the course of the project we spent a lot of time refining the design and reassessing the core gameplay that makes *Drakan* fun. We thought carefully about what we could add to the mix to take the game to the next level. I don't think there's anyone who thinks we didn't dramatically improve on the original game, so we all feel pretty good about that.

Do you set parameters from the outset and then



It takes a village... and a lot of office space, junk food, Starbucks and Bawls.

within a certain range in terms of site distance, frame rates, texture quality, model poly counts, etc. If not, when do these factors rear their ugly heads?

Well, ideally, you do, and we're pretty strict about that on our current projects. When *Drakan: The Ancients' Gates* started, it was a PC title, and as a result the limits of what the hardware could handle were fairly well understood. We knew what we could handle in terms of polygons, draw distances, texture size, et cetera. However, when the game switched to PlayStation 2, all of that went out the window. We switched to the PS2 before that console had actually shipped, and there were a lot of unknowns about what it would and would not be able to do. Sony had evangelized the technology a lot, so we felt really confident about the project and the beautiful world we would be able to create. But working with a console system like the PS2 is more fundamentally different than PC development than anyone realized, both in terms of technology and the type of gameplay a game-pad supports and what people expect from a game they're going to play in their living room instead of in front of their PC. So there was a long period of experimentation before we finally got a good hold on the PS2 and were able to finally complete the game.

We hear so much about "tools." What are they specifically and why is it some developers seem to have better ones than others?

Tools, or "level editors" as they're often called, can be a big investment in terms of the programmer time it requires to make them. As a result, a lot of developers may attempt to skimp on them, trying to basically use Maya or 3D Studio Max as their level editor, which can be disastrous if not done carefully. From the very start of the company, Surreal has placed a heavy emphasis on getting tools that make everyone's job easier, which in turn leads to a better game. For example, it might be possible to set up some complex gameplay situations using the text tags in 3D Studio Max or something like that, but it's not the easiest way. And the easier and more efficient the tools are to use, the more the designers will be able to experiment and try to make the game itself better. We think tools are absolutely essential, and devote a lot of programmer time to making them as solid and robust as possible.

What goes into developing an engine? How long should a good one last? Can they be modified for better performance down the road, or are they limited to one type of game?

At Surreal, we're still using the latest iteration of the engine that goes back a number of years, that shipped with the original *Drakan* game. That makes it about four to five years old. Though it's still that same technology, I would say a very large amount of it has been rewritten from scratch over that time, such that very few lines of code from the original engine have remained untouched. For example, we certainly did a huge amount of work on the rendering pipeline to get the best performance possible on the PS2. Fortunately, the engine was architected in such a way that it made it possible to upgrade the engine without having to rewrite it all from scratch. Our engine is good at doing expansive outdoor environments with seamless indoor/outdoor transitions, and that dictates the type of games we make, which is why we were such a good fit for the Tolkien universe. We wouldn't want to try to make a corridor shooter with the engine, for example, because that would be going against what our technology does best.

What about music? Is it created as you go or do you score a game after it's complete? Do you do your scores in house? *D2* had an amazing score.

Thanks for the compliment on the *Drakan* score. It was done externally by Eric Aho of the Music Design Network. He came on a bit toward the end of the project, developing musical themes for the environments that we had built, working with our producer and audio director, Nick Radovich. There was a lot of work with our sound designer Boyd Post in terms of careful placing of the score, where music would play in the game progression. Getting an epic score was really key for pulling off a game like *Drakan*, and we think it came out quite well.

At what point in a game's development do you know (or not), "Okay, we have a great game here"?

When you work on a game for as long as we worked on *Drakan*, you can become so close to the project that it's hard to know whether what you have is any good or not. But there are definitely those key moments, typically toward the end of a project, when all the different elements of art, programming, design, and sound start coming together, and you say, "Wow, this is starting to look like a game!" When it all comes together after months of planning and hard work, it can be extremely satisfying.

I know that *Drakan 2*, an epic scope game, easily one of the top console adventures ever, took a long time, and had its share of pitfalls during its development, which you overcame with good management and a great team. Regarding it specifically: Are you happy with it? And more importantly, are you happy with how it was received?

Though the development was long and, because of our move to PS2, there was a lot of rework. The one thing everyone at the company can say is that they're proud of how the game turned out in the end. We're also very happy with the fan reaction to the game, which has been extremely positive. People who like the game seem to like it a lot, and really enjoy exploring the game world, finding all the secrets we buried in there. So we have no complaints.

At some point, your baby has to leave home and then it's up to PR and the press to take the ball and run with it. On *Drakan 2*, I played the game for 50 hours before writing the review but I've a feeling few others did. Do you notice this? Do you read your reviews? Ultimately, do you feel the game was properly represented, and be 100% honest please. I read one review where someone complained that there was too much walking in the game which, given that it's heavily combat and exploration based, you definitely want and need (duh). Doesn't that make you crazy?

We definitely are interested in checking out what the press has to say about what we've all spent a lot of time working hard on, so, yes, we definitely read reviews. I personally know that reviewers, especially in the print media, often have a limited amount of time before they have to go to press, so getting into a really long game like *Drakan* is sometimes just not an option. It can be frustrating sometimes when it's clear that the person writing the game doesn't like a fantasy setting or anything resembling a role-playing game, and they end up giving a game a bad review as a result. That said, we don't have any

"When you work on a game as long as we worked on Drakan, you can become so close to the project it's hard to know whether what you have is any good or not."

"We're fans of all types of games here at Surreal, and it's great to spread your wings and try new things on new projects."

complaints. With a few exceptions, we felt the game got a pretty fair evaluation by the press.

On that note, we felt that too little art was available for *Drakan 2*, which made coverage difficult. Do you think about the press during a games development? We imagine you have an artist cooking up assets for max exposure, but, this is often not the case. What's the reason for this? Too costly?

One trouble with doing art to promote a game is, typically, right at the time you need to get some screenshots done or high-res renders of the characters or whatever, that is also exactly the same time you're trying to fix bugs and actually ship the game. So it can be hard to find the time to do it, much as we may want to.

How well does a game like *Drakan 2* need to do for you to consider a sequel? And, are you?

As eager as we were to do the sequel to the first *Drakan*, after *Drakan: The Ancients' Gates* shipped, the team was definitely eager to move on to new territory, both in terms of setting and game design. So, I definitely wouldn't rule out us doing a sequel in the future, but we've moved on to some new projects at present.

Okay, back to developer stuff. What's your take on bump mapping? As far as we're concerned, it's absolutely fantastic, one of the best effects in the history of games. That said, few games use it, even on Xbox. Can you shine some light on the subject?

We love bump mapping, and the original *Drakan* for the PC used it extensively. It simply wasn't something that the PS2 could handle, given our far draw distances and high polygon objects. We are adding it to the technology for future projects, and our artists are psyched to get it back into our games.

What about "baked-in" textures, is this a good alternative?

Interesting you should ask that. Based-in shadows is actually something we added to our technology shortly after *Drakan* shipped, and it's been a tremendous boon to the look of our current projects. In fact, the *Fellowship of the Ring* title we just shipped used it to tremendous effect.

What do you think of the state of action gaming today... on one side we have *GTA* and *The Getaway*, pushing the violence envelope, while on another we have epics and platformers like *Mario, Star Fox, Malice, Jet Set, Kingdom Hearts, Metroid,* your game, *Sly Cooper, Ty Tiger, Ratchet & Clank* and so on... Then there are of course those lovely movie games of which *Buffy* is, like, still the only great one. Which path will Surreal choose as we cross yet another threshold and what's your take as a team on today's scene?

You must be reading our minds. As you say, we've covered the epic, action-adventure, original property ground with *Drakan*. Since that, we've been working with the Tolkien license on our *Fellowship of the Ring* game, which, as I mentioned, will have shipped by the time you read this. As fun as it can be to develop an original universe, it can also be a total blast to work with a rich fantasy universe that is extremely well developed, such as Tolkien's brilliant creation. The fact that *The Lord of the Rings* is a beloved and revered work is a heavy burden to carry, but we've worked hard to make sure we live up to his legacy. And finally, we have another project in development that is completely different–a mature game set in a real-world setting, with some interesting twists thrown in. After having worked so long on fantasy, there were definitely plenty of people at Surreal, myself included, who were ready to try something completely different, and we've found an outlet for that. Unfortunately, I can't tell you much about that particular project at this time. We're fans of all types of games here at Surreal, and it's great to spread your wings and try new things on new projects.

Before you set out to make a game, do you search to see how many like it are in development? Do you play the best and then look for ways to improve on it? Or do you just go?

In game development, particularly for the consoles, you definitely need to know your competition. There are certain control and game-design issues that have been worked out by other games. Why reinvent the wheel when you can take something that already works and add your own spin and new ideas to it? At the same time, it's important not to just clone an existing game, because history has shown us gamers are certainly not interested in a rehash of what was popular last Christmas. So it's a balance of looking at what other games did right and did wrong and then going somewhere fresh and exciting while not creating something completely bizarre and foreign. The most important thing to do is to develop something that you believe in and think is going to be fun to play. In game development, if you don't like what you're working on, how will you ever know if it's any good or not?

Have you worked on GameCube? This system is a real paradox. Games made specifically for it are simply astonishing, while games ported to it look horrible. What's the deal?

It's certainly almost always true that whatever system a game is originally developed for is going the system where the title is going to look the best. *Metal Gear Solid 2* is a great example of a PS2 title that pushed the system to its absolute limits, and you can really tell in how good it looks. They couldn't have done that if they'd ported it. Same holds true for *Halo*, certainly one of the best looking Xbox titles, because it was developed expressly for that system, and not ported over like so many other Xbox titles. Since the PS2 has the largest share of the market by far, most developers develop first for PS2, because that's where all the players are, and, more than anything, game developers want as many people to play their games as possible.

We know you have the PS2 dialed, but what about Xbox. Couldn't you port Drakan 2, and add some bump-mapping? Now that would be lovely.

Drakan: The Ancients' Gates was developed exclusively for PlayStation 2. There are a lot of advantages to working as a first-party developer with the console manufacturer such as Sony, Microsoft, or Nintendo, and they're certainly fabulous at supporting your development. But they want the game exclusively for their system, and that's what *Drakan* will remain.

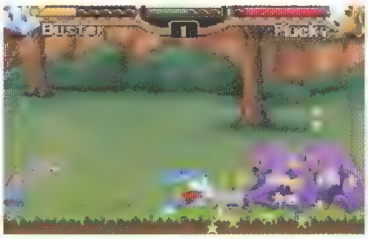
And finally, what are you up to, what's next?

As I mentioned, we've just wrapped up the *Fellowship of the Ring* game coming out this Christmas. We're doing both a PS2 and PC version of that title. It's based on the book, which gives us a lot more room to move when developing the game than if we were tied to only what happened in the movie. Following that, we're working on a *Two Towers* game which should be coming out by this time next year for multiple platforms, and then a *Return of the King* game after that. So Tolkien's going to be keeping us busy for a while, which means our fantasy-loving developers are in heaven. Beyond that, we have the other title I mentioned before, something which is totally different from anything Surreal has done before. It's an original property, and we have high hopes for it. We'll be sure to keep you posted as it takes [shape.]

Tiny Toons Adventures: Scary Dreams

play rating ●●●◐○

developer: **treasure** / publisher: **conspiracy games** / available: **now**



Once upon a time, super developer Treasure took this license to a place it hasn't been since—triple-A town—with *Tiny Toons Adventures: Buster Busts Loose* for the SNES. If you have a SNES and haven't played it, find it. Now, some years later, rather than improving on the model, they've applied the *TT* brand to their *Alien Soldier* mold, creating a weird yet somehow intoxicating side-scrolling brawler. Most likely, *Alien Soldier* means nothing to you, so just imagine relentless—but very well designed—2D fighting action, like *Final Fight* on crack. All of the requisite nuances are in place in terms of balance, animation, and Treasure's crazy brand of multi-hit combos via character-specific special moves that you'll be dolling out like free beer at Ozzfest. It's a solid—if not great—take on rudimentary action, which lends itself to repetition; however, due to Treasure's incestuous nature of building clever nuances into its titles aimed directly at action mainliners, the end result (fluffy and cute on the inside with a hard core outer shell) is both fun and freaky. Hey, whenever it's Treasure, it's recommended!

Dave Halverson

The Lord of the Rings: TFoTR

play rating ●●●○○

developer: **pocket studios** / publisher: **black label games** / available: **now**

[Lady Arwen] Greetings I am Lady Arwen, daughter of Elrond I have a gift for you, Frodo, but it must be earned and returned to me here.

Turn-based RPGs aren't exactly a hot commodity on the GBA these days. In fact, aside from *Golden Sun*, I can't think of one that interests me. Popping in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, I expected the usual overhead action fare, bopping over to Mordor as Frodo, beating orcs and such with a stick along the way. It turns out there is much more to this mini epic than meets the eye, including, initially, lots of waddling around, talking to folks, amassing your supplies and finding Sam and Pippin to accompany you on your journey. The text is small, though, and the isometric directionals are hard to muster due to the nature of the design. Rather than pressing left to walk left proportionately with the landscape, you must mash the diagonals, ultimately wearing an indelible groove into your thumb. This isn't a game breaker, but an oversight nevertheless. The turn-based fighting is a tad sluggish, too, but as your character levels build (the entire Fellowship will ultimately be at hand), they become equally more enjoyable. Visually, the game is quite wonderful. In fact, every facet of it seems polished, other than the D-pad woes. I recommend taking this journey if you have a long one ahead yourself, along with a great light and a little patience.

Dave Halverson

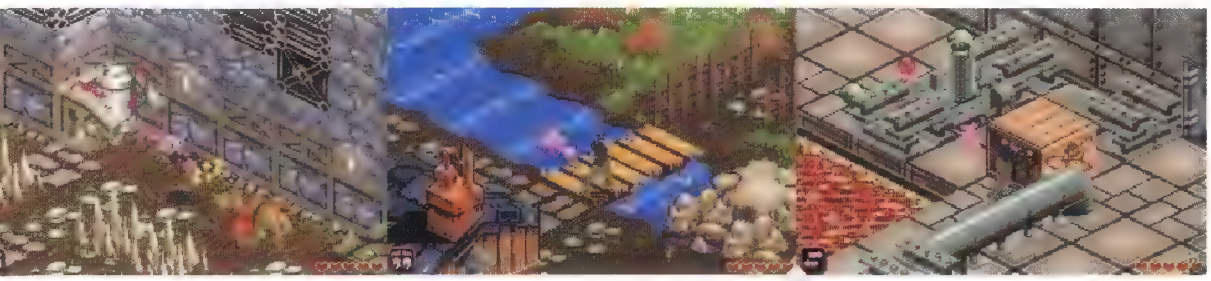
Vividly animated, isometric heaven

TREASURE PLANET

words dave halverson

Based on the PS2, and now this GBA game, *Treasure Planet* has quickly become of great interest to me. Perhaps the fact that this is, like, the only GBA game on the planet not by Digital Eclipse has something to do with it. Someone actually got it into their head to create a throwback to *LandStalker*, the beloved Genesis game that put the "I" in isometric. In this game, initially, Jim and Morph must first find pieces of his solar-surfer, which has been dismantled and conveniently placed at the back-end of some truly fun puzzles. Getting there, amassing new moves along the way, Jim and Morph punch, kick, jump, dodge, and figure their way through a set of nicely detailed and designed levels, alive with animation and color. Especially keen, Bizarre Creations has found a way to make isometric comfy on GBA by not forcing the player to use diagonals. Instead, the D-pad is synched perfectly with the physical direction you want Jim to go—which should be good for a golf clap, at the very least. Once Jim and Morph assemble the solar-surfer, the game's other mode is revealed: Viewpoint-style, isometric-action shooting stages where you'll jump (nice scaling!), shoot, and dodge your way between the game's nicely depicted, movie-themed worlds. *Treasure Planet* is easily the best isometric game on the GBA and, as a result, one of the best original hand-held actioners this year.

"Alive with animation and color, *TP* is easily the best isometric game on the GBA."



Jim and Morph in action.

treasure planet

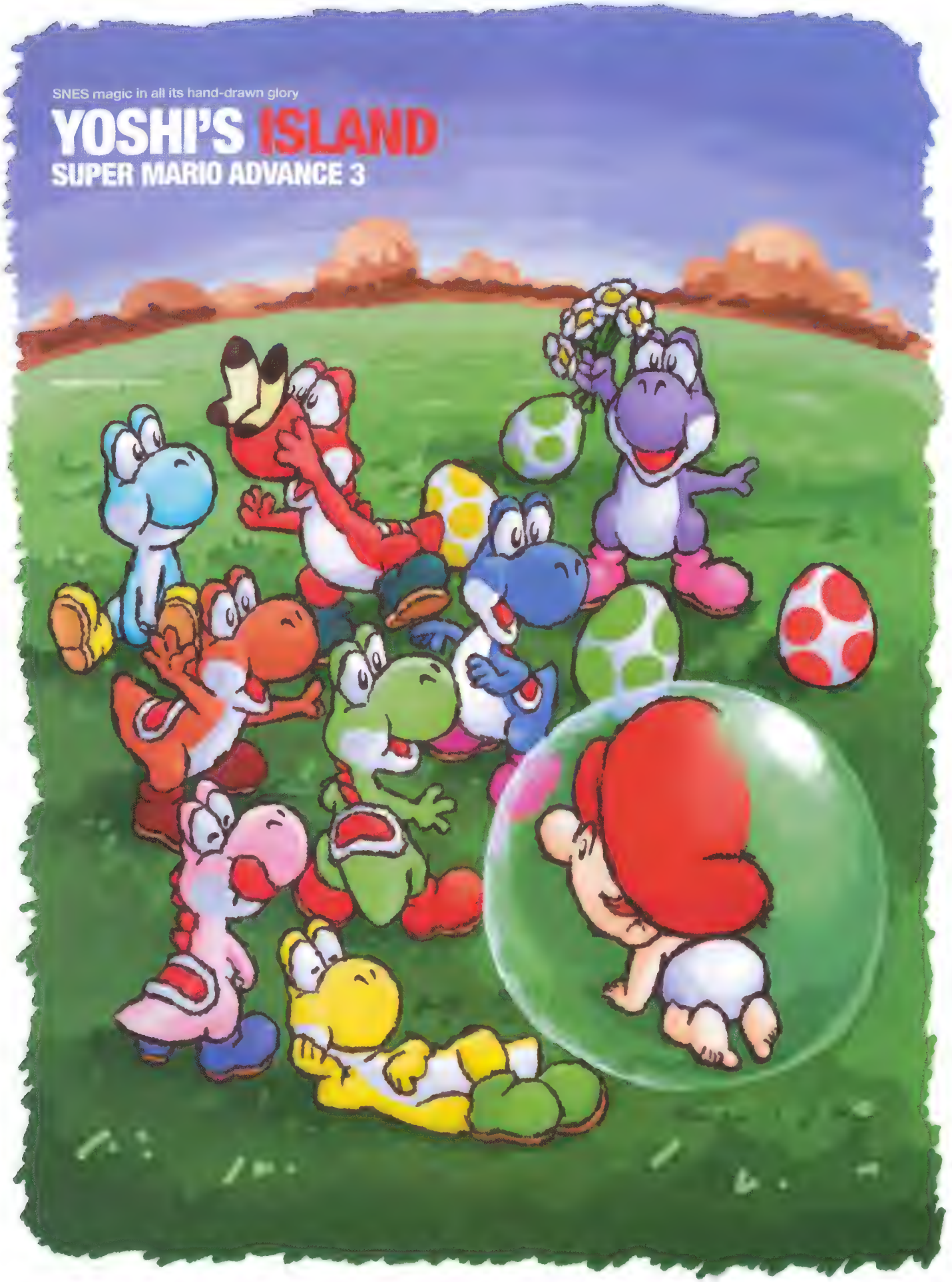
developer: **bizarre creations**
publisher: **disney interactive**
available: **now**

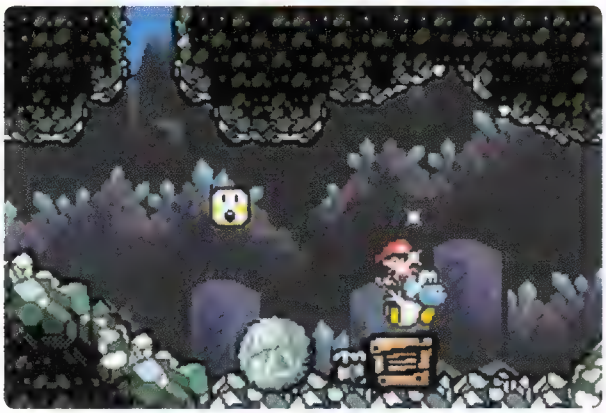
As expected, Bizarre Creations spares no expense creating a deep, worthwhile adventure for the GB Advance.

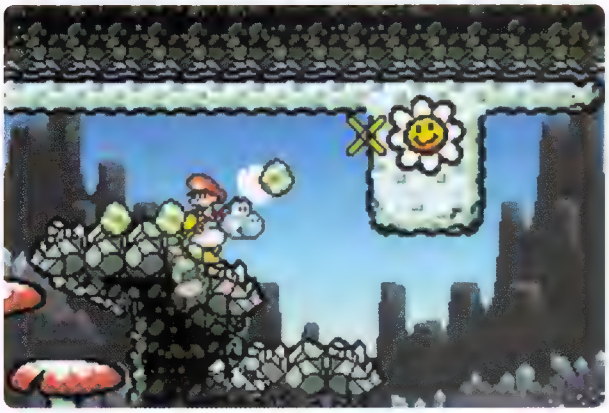
play rating ●●●●○

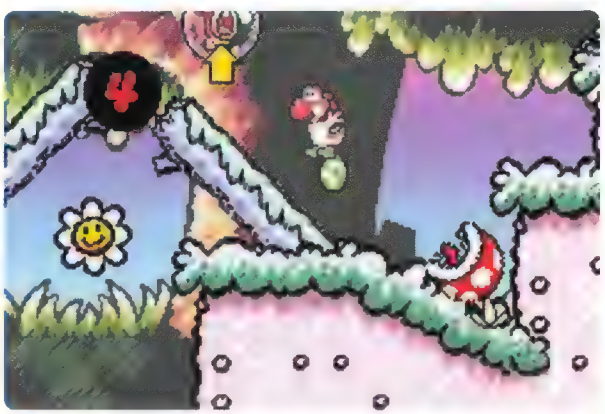
SNES magic in all its hand-drawn glory

YOSHI'S ISLAND
SUPER MARIO ADVANCE 3









W

"...one of my favorite games of its kind..."

yoshi's island: super mario advance 3

play rating

GBA

developer: **nintendo** / publisher: **nintendo** / available: **now**

Yoshi's Island is so good in so many ways, it belongs in everyone's GBA library, if only to return to the pinnacle of hand-drawn 2D.

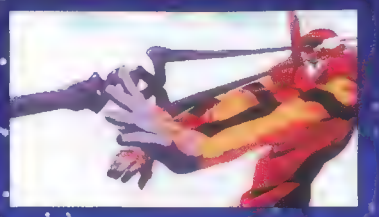
play anime

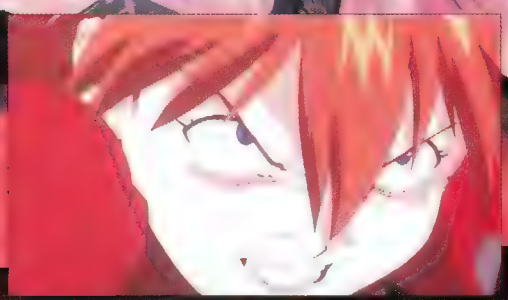
art from *Hellsing*

NEON GENESIS EVANGELION

END OF EVANGELION

words dave halverson





It's not really possible to review *The End of Evangelion* in the conventional sense; interpret maybe, but to attempt to evaluate it under normal guidelines is impossible. The series affected millions in different ways, depending on their individual beliefs and internal mechanism. I think it scares some, while others likely have no interest in understanding it at all. Nevertheless, it exists for all to see and gain enlightenment; or not, depending on, I suppose, opportunity. See, even trying to write about it makes me philosophical. The 90-minute finale is like a waking download of dizzying symbolism, being mainlined directly into your brain, diving head-first into the primordial soup and man's relationship with God and the universe. Once absorbed, even if you do get it on some level, I defy you to attempt to express it in words.

Personally, among so many key scenes, I felt that the last moments shared between Misato and Shinji were key in determining the fate of the world—his only somewhat-real relationship having come full circle. She actually understood him and sent him on his way to the cataclysmic end. I also found the real-world images—especially the beautiful glimpses of Japan that Gainax fused with the animation—extremely provocative.

We really do take so much for granted. What a spectacular piece of work *Evangelion* is. It's a wonder that HBO or a similar network hasn't discovered it. Perhaps it's too deep for prime time still. Oh well, maybe someday. **play**

"The 90-minute finale is like a waking download of dizzying symbolism."

neon genesis evangelion: the end of evangelion — play rating

studio: **manga entertainment** / rating: **16-up** / running time: **90 minutes**

5.1 DTS ES Surround in English and Japanese, 5.1 Dolby Digital EX Surround in English and Japanese, subtitle options for dialogue and on-screen text, audio commentary by voice actors Amanda Wyss Lee, Tiffesin Jaffe and Jason C. Lee, Manga previews, and web links

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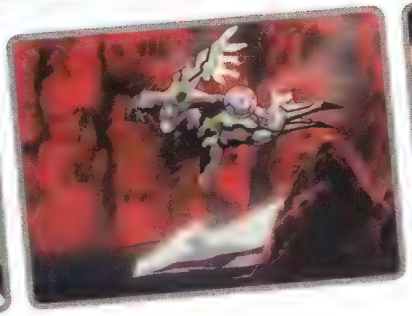
ZONE OF THE ENDERS
IDOLO

words dave halverson



"Mars has been colonized, so of course, Earthlings have attacked it..."

To date, everything associated with the *Zone of the Enders* brand has dripped quality, from the PS2 game (especially the coveted, shiny gold collector's box from Japan) to the sequel (which is looking grand), to this very special OVA, localized aptly by ADV Films. *Idolo* is the lead-in show to the upcoming series, *Dolores i* (also from ADV, coming this November), and the prequel to the videogame, which chronicles events following this very tragic tale. The year is 2167. Mars has been colonized, so of course, Earthlings have attacked it, and currently hold dominion over the Martians born on Mars. Due to the differences in gravity, humans (Earthers) are stronger than Martians (humans born on Mars), and the stereotypical pompous asshole warmongers abuse them as such. Remember that saying, "The meek shall inherit the Earth"? Well, looks like they'll inherit Mars, too. Martians are more intelligent—smarter than humans, and so, tension is mounting.

Second Lieutenant Radium Lavan of the United Colonies of Mars is about to turn the tide, but his life will never be the same. When he and his teammate Viola are reassigned to a secret project in a remote Mars base, they meet the Orbital Frame, a mobile suit with immense power. Like most such suits, synching with it produces a synergistic bond, but in this case, the suits' hatred of Earth is channeled through Radium, leading to a dramatic set of circumstances that make *Idolo*, far and away, the best game-to-anime conversion to date. Produced in 2001, the look is ultra clean and crisp, and what must have been a sufficient budget really comes through onscreen. The animation is excellent and the characters up-close and the backgrounds are especially detailed, giving *Idolo* an overall polish seldom, if ever, seen in a game-based OVA. What a fantastic start this *Z.O.E.* has received; one can only hope the series can measure up. If the same writers are on board, even with TV animation, it should be glorious. **play**

zone of the enders: idolo vol.1 play rating

studio: **adv films** / rating: **15-up** / running time: **55 minutes**

Director, Chief Character Designer, Character Designer and Mecha Designer interviews, Z.O.E. timeline, production sketches, and ADV previews.

SAKURA WARS
1 Return of the Spirit Warriors
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BERSERK
IMMORTAL SOLDIER

words dave halverson

I can recall very few anime stories as powerful as *Berserk*'s, and not a single one of them, aside from maybe *Evangelion*, is made for TV. There is something about the way it's all pieced together—a combination of dramatic still frames, animation, and surprisingly inventive camera movement—that makes *Berserk* resonate so strongly and the best medieval/fantasy show I've seen, by far.

My fondness for the Dreamcast game has likely swayed me somewhat, but there's no denying that the relationship between Griffith and Guts, which is spiraling into a very, very dark place, makes for some seriously gripping drama. In *V2: Immortal Soldier*, after the two are practically ripped to shreds by an invincible demon, Zodd, in a battle bathed in blood, their bonds become ever stronger—although Guts is warned by the demon that the friendship will lead to his imminent destruction. During Griffith's healing period, with Guts and Cosca feuding by his side, his power continues to grow within the kingdom, but so does dissension among the jealous Knights he and his powerful army, led by Guts, have replaced, leading to even more sinister acts and deception.

All four episodes in *Immortal Soldier* are spellbinding and, in an odd way, haunting. We know from the beginning that Guts ends up riddled with pain, an invincible yet demon-possessed, soulless warrior. Watching the degradation is a curious addiction that I just can't seem to get enough of. **play**

"All four episodes in *Immortal Soldier* are spellbinding and, in an odd way, haunting."

berserk: immortal soldier — **play** rating

studio: **anime works** / rating: **16-up** / running time: **100 minutes**

Outtakes, production sketches, textless opening, and art gallery.

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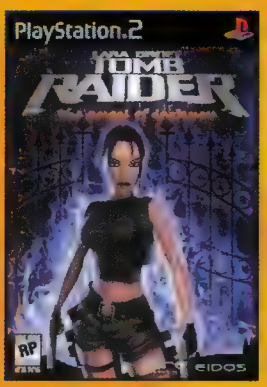
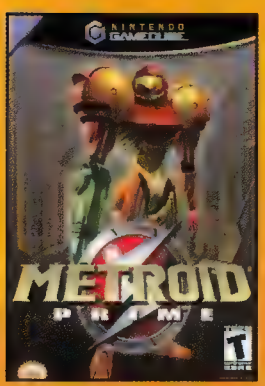


TOMB RAIDER: THE ANGEL OF DARKNESS
EIDOS



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NINTENDO

STARFOX ADVENTURES
NINTENDO

MARIO PARTY 4
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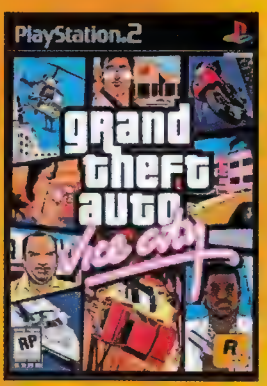

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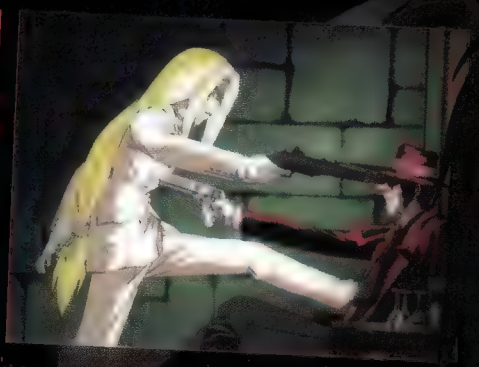

The first volume of *Hellsing*, *Impure Souls*, left me wanting one thing, more. So imagine my dismay as *Order 04: Innocent as a Human* got underway... and bored me to tears. Voyeuristic vampires? Crooked news anchors? C'mon. A rogue Hellsing captain decides it's time to shine a light where Integra Hellsing prefers it dark and ends up getting a little gift from Victoria (the kind that shoots out of a barrel) while the newswoman becomes lunch for Alucard, as the sun finally sets on a very bland episode, obviously meant to reveal certain facts about the Hellsing Organization. The top-secret nature of the organization's mission: disposing of non-human creatures and their earthly activity, and a certain vulnerability, was not presented in the series' debut, so all is forgiven. *Order 05: Brotherhood* introduces us to the Valentine Bros. and their world of man-made vampires—humans implanted with "freak chips." After discovering Hellsing's planted agent and sucking him dry, they decide it's time to have a little party at Integra's place... and all hell, quite literally, breaks loose.

Bringing us to *Order 06: Dead Zone*. Many revelations unfurl here: Victoria's bloodlust grows stronger, as her gun, the 30-mm Anti-Freak Harkonin Cannon, grows longer; Alucard, also sporting a new gun adorned with the words "Jesus Christ is in Heaven now" unleashes his true form (make that forms); and we meet The Angel of Death—Alucard's retired mentor, Walter, skilled in the art of slicing and dicing his prey. The message? F—k with Hellsing and pay the ultimate price, but when all is said, done, and sprayed, it's not over by a long shot. If the series continues down this path of one episode being used to set up the next, so be it. *Blood Brothers* was a tasty morsel that left me, again, wanting more. **play**

"F—k with the Hellsing Organization and pay the ultimate price."

hellsing: blood brothers — **play** rating

Bilingual audio, staff interviews, creditless ending, and concept art collection.

studio: **pioneer entertainment** / rating: **16-up** / running time: **75 minutes**

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Y's

words dave halverson

It's strange to think that most of the people playing videogames today probably didn't experience the transition from cartridge to CD that *Y's Book I* and *II* brought when it was released with the TurboGrafx CD back in 1989. For those who do, you remember the story. *Y's* was a Utopia, a land of peace and prosperity ruled by two beautiful goddesses and six priests, a world of magic, etc, etc. Cue a great evil: buried relics, six separate books, monsters everywhere and one very unlikely hero drawn to the whole mess, compelled by a mysterious force to set things right: Adol. In the game, he did so by literally running into things—I mean it, that was the battle system—barely nicking them to one side with your sword. It was funny because it was so hard to get started, yet the music (by Yuzo Koshiro) was so amazing, you couldn't stop.

Nevertheless, now you can sit back and relive it, sans control pad, music and all, as Adol makes his way to Esteria and into the Darm Tower to reclaim the first book in this first volume of the anime series.

For an older series, *Y's: Book I* is surprisingly captivating. After a frightful first battle (never make monsters out of running trees—never) that almost made me upchuck my soy chips, I found the rest of the inaugural volume quite wonderful. Anime Works does extremely good voice work, and the character design, though a tad too realistic for my taste, is very good (except, of course, for those trees). Whether or not my affinity for the series has jaded me is definitely in question, but I'm pretty sure you'll like it, seeing as how you are reading about it in a videogame magazine.

"For an older series *Y's: Book I* is surprisingly captivating."

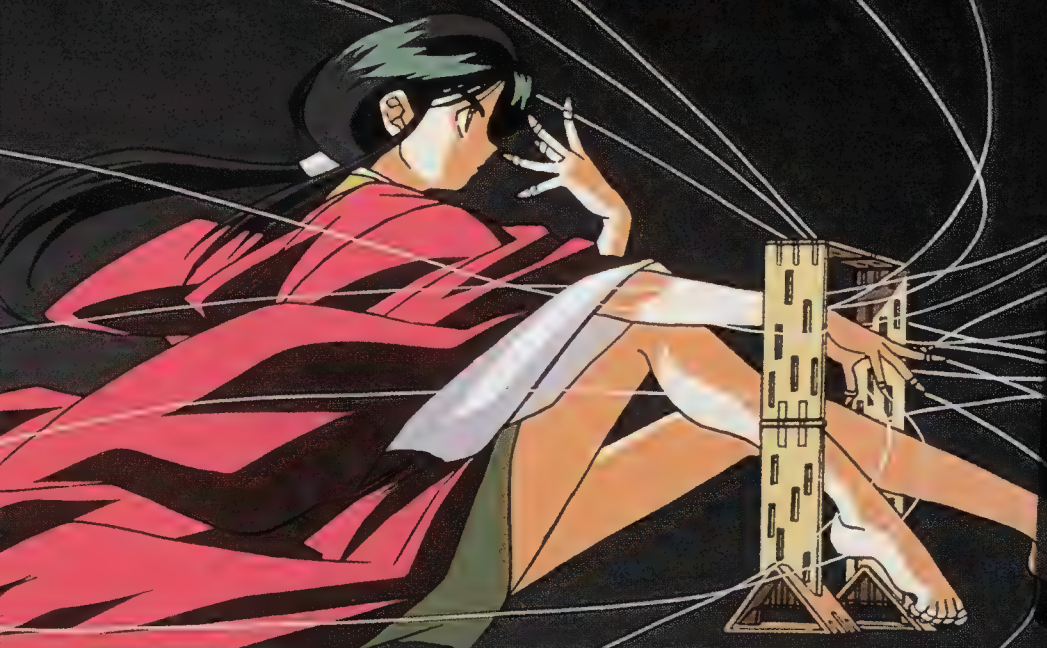
y's: book i — **play rating**

Whether you remember the games or not, *Y's* is required viewing.

studio: **anime works** / rating: **13-up** / running time: **120 minutes**

PUPPET PRINCESS

words dave halverson



Although it's been out on DVD for awhile, Anime Works' *Puppet Princess* flew under the radar, and one of the year's best one-shots went by somewhat undetected. The story, chronicling a young girl's revenge against the evil tyrant General Karimata (responsible for killing her father) takes some funky twists, has gorgeous character designs and animation, and features the world's largest backpack, among other things. Set in 16th-century Japan, a time of ruthless warlords and rampant violence, we find young Rangiku scanning the countryside, looking for a legendary ninja to watch her back while she works her magic manipulating the amazing puppet warriors her father spent a lifetime perfecting, and ultimately died trying to protect. She soon meets up with Yasaburo, who has a similar goal, but like most retired Ninjas, is reserved to pretty much lying around. Soon after, he joins with Rangiku, just as we begin feeling sorry for her father the story takes a wretched twist and spirals into an extremely dark, almost black comedy. At 40 minutes, *Puppet Princess* is short, but if you appreciate the joys of the animation process, it warrants watching several times; otherwise, head to your local Blockbuster and definitely give it a rent.

puppet princess — **play rating**

Gorgeous animation, black comedy and ultra-dark themes... *PP*'s short but sweet.

studio: **anime works** / rating: **16-up** / running time: **40 minutes**

"It belongs on any list of the greatest war films ever made."
- Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*

Grave of the Fireflies

"...brilliant masterwork." - *The Complete Anime Guide*

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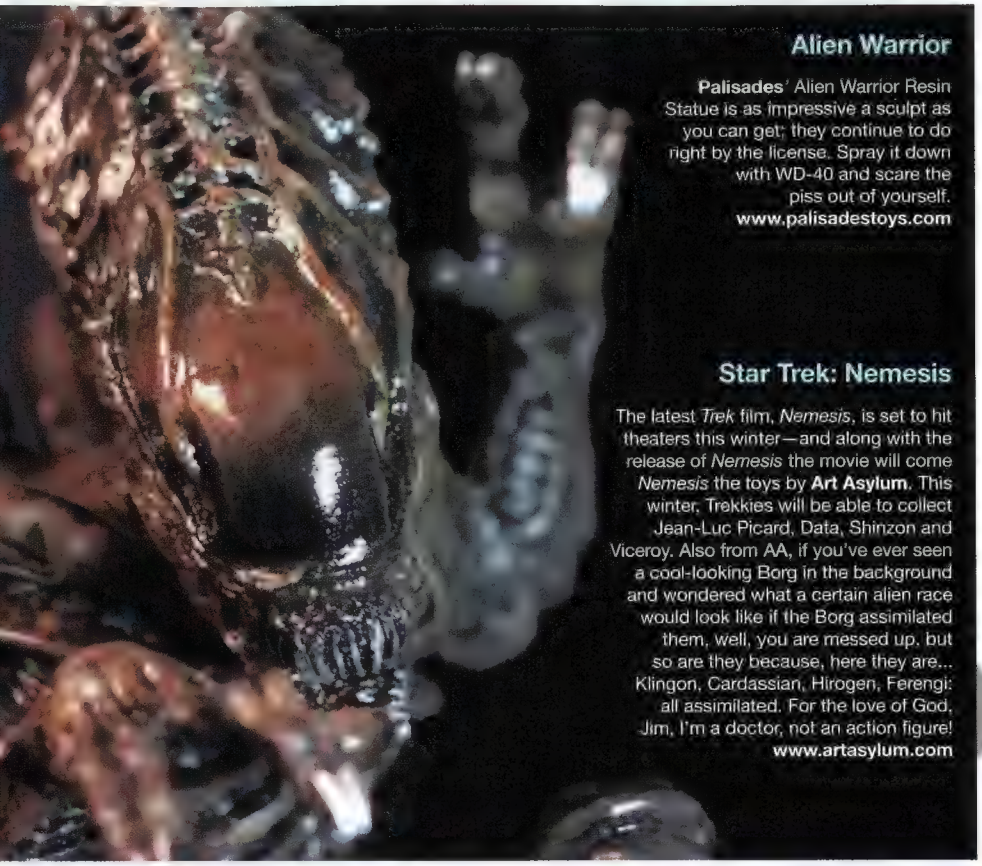

Alien Warrior

Palisades' Alien Warrior Resin Statue is as impressive a sculpt as you can get; they continue to do right by the license. Spray it down with WD-40 and scare the piss out of yourself.
www.palisadestoys.com

Star Trek: Nemesis

The latest *Trek* film, *Nemesis*, is set to hit theaters this winter—and along with the release of *Nemesis* the movie will come *Nemesis* the toys by **Art Asylum**. This winter, Trekkies will be able to collect Jean-Luc Picard, Data, Shinzon and Viceroy. Also from AA, if you've ever seen a cool-looking Borg in the background and wondered what a certain alien race would look like if the Borg assimilated them, well, you are messed up, but so are they because, here they are... Klingon, Cardassian, Hirogen, Ferengi: all assimilated. For the love of God, Jim, I'm a doctor, not an action figure!
www.artasylum.com

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The *Armitage: Dual-Matrix* limited edition action doll from **Toynami** gives "My Favorite Martian" a whole new meaning.
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RHINOMATION

from DreamWorks' ***The Ring***

Panic Room

columbia/tristar
rated r

movie ●●●●●
dvd ●●●●●

David Fincher is the sultan of style—at least in the filmmaking world. It's obvious that in the hands of any other director, *Fight Club* could have easily dropped from cult classic status to the B-movie bargain bin. *Se7en*, a rough-and-tumble crime thriller injected with his trademark gritty-yet-grandiose visuals, could have been the subject of direct-to-video mockery if it hadn't been for Fincher's grim vision. Even *Alien 3*, the least meritorious of his silver screen efforts, had a distinct edge to it. Now, with *Panic Room*, he boxes his creative energy into a cozy Upper East Side home. Enter Meg Altman (played with great desperation and determined force by Jodie Foster), a recently divorced single mother who just closed escrow on a prime real-estate deal. The over-sized house: part post-marriage therapy, part metaphor for how empty she feels. But it's not until three unruly crooks charge in that the action really commences. In the relentless pursuit of a hidden fortune, the trio heads up to the stairs—the site of a state-of-the-art "panic room" (complete with an outside phone line, food, water, and security cameras galore). Locked inside, scared witless, is Altman and her daughter Sarah—as well as a few million dollars in a floor-bound safe. The masked men want in; the mother and daughter want out. Yet, it's not as simple as it sounds. The commanding thief (Forest Whitaker) works for the company that installed all the cool gadgetry; and the other two are full of even more surprises. Fincher, showing that he's more capable than ever, maintains an immense amount of tension from within such a tiny, limited set piece. The film has the energy of an action movie, but the solace of a stage-bound play. Only five actors occupy most of the screen time, and for that 112 minutes, a shit storm brews violently into a hurricane-whip. Explosions, gunplay, bodily threats, bloodshed, and slo-mo intensity—it's a molotov cocktail of a movie. Once the fuss is lit, that's only the beginning; there's still the initial blast and the rampant fire that spreads afterward. Even the slightest touches, like CG effects, are used on a distinctly higher plane than most blockbusters. To achieve his sweeping, seamless shots, oftentimes resulting in the camera passing through walls and floorboards, Fincher employs the help of the special effects department—it's not excessive; it's practical style. With all that in mind, *Panic Room* equates to the ultimate cat-and-mouse chase—a hunt in which the two headstrong mice are never more than a few feet away from the three burly, beastly, money-snorting cats; only a few inches of drywall and a foot of reinforced steel tend to be their barrier.

VALUE: The "Superbit" formula: No extras.

Jon M Gibson

CQ

mgm
rated r

movie ●●●●●
dvd ●●●●●

My sole word of advice if you're a movie fan—support the arthouse. Because when a film like *CQ* is showcased amid the sticky floor and unbearably uncomfortable seats of your local mom 'n' pop indie theater, you can't afford to miss it. What writer/director Roman Coppola, son of Francis, has conceived is a wickedly cool sci-fi riff, ripe with hip eye-candy and offbeat drama. The notion: follow a young director in 1969 Paris as he wraps production on the "futuristic" film *Dragonfly*, a fantasy spy flick set in the far-off, technology-revved landscape of 2001 (complete with personal spacecraft and bubble architecture). On the surface level, it's spoofing those vintage space adventures from the '60s and '70s that missed the mark when predicting what later decades would bring; but, strategically, it doesn't fall victim to disembodying special effects "cheese." Instead, *CQ* cuffs a cool balance of the silly and the strikingly surreal. Kudos to the cast, too—mellow Jeremy Davies, sultry Angela Lindvall, campy Billy Zane, flamboyant Jason Schwartzman, and maniacal Gerard Depardieu—for carrying the film with class.

VALUE: Even though the film itself was low-rent, MGM spared no expense when crafting this wildly creative disc. Four vignettes (each edited by fellow Coppolas) are only the beginning.

Jon M Gibson

Near Dark

anchor bay
rated r

movie ●●●●●
dvd ●●●●●

Kathryn Bigelow is, more often than not, overlooked as a director. But her films are a definitive marker of her talent, whether your recognize her name or not: *Point Break*, *Strange Days*, and this cult landmark, *Near Dark*. It's an ultra-violent indie picture, teaming with blood, bullets and, most importantly, fangs. But it surpasses most every other vampire romp for a few distinct reasons: The word "vampire" is never actually said (because, if you were a modern day bloodsucker, you wouldn't exactly label yourself); and it's paced like an Eastwood western, showing the dire transformation from mortal to immortal in *very* human terms. Yet, it all depends on what you're searching for in a film about night-walkers: a glamorized depiction of immortality, or one that treats the urge to suck—that insatiable hunger that vamps must suppress on a nightly basis for survival—as something infinitely more severe than a heroin addiction. It's outrageous, scary, and dripping with style.

VALUE: Anchor Bay, for one, didn't overlook this classic. "Living in Darkness," a 47-minute retrospective documentary, is great evidence of that, collecting the entire cast and crew for in-depth interviews. Along with an alternate audio track featuring Bigelow—as well as a deleted scene—this two-disc set is the ultimate *Near Dark* archive.

Jon M Gibson

newsbytes

words **thomas chau**

. . . ***SUPER* BATTLE:** With *Charlie's Angels* director McG gone from the director's chair for the new *Superman* movie, Warner Bros. has brought on *Red Dragon* director Brett Ratner to bring JJ Abrams' script to the big screen, which is being prepped for a 2003 production start . . . **BACKED UP BIRD CAGE:** *The Hollywood Reporter* reports that Nicolas Cage will star in *Back Up*, which takes place in the future where resuscitation is possible and memories are, er, "backed up." Cage plays a cop who is murdered and then revived with the intent on hunting down his own killer . . . **MAXIMUS RETARDENESS:** *The Hollywood Reporter* confirms all Internet rumors that DreamWorks is finally moving forward with *Gladiator 2*, with John Logan, who scripted the first film, scribing the sequel. Although we will not see the likes of Russell Crowe or Joaquin Phoenix in the "sequel," the film takes place 15 years after the first and will most likely introduce new characters . . . **SPIDER-MAN: THE PULITZER VERSION:** Pulitzer Prize-winning author Michael Chabon has been brought in to rewrite the *Spider-Man* sequel, now titled *The Amazing Spider-Man*. *Variety* reports that shooting is expected to begin in January for a May 7, 2004 release . . .

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DVD VIDEO

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The Scorpion King
Universal
Available Now

interview the rock

ROCK SOLID

[illegible]

Dwayne Johnson (a.k.a. The Rock) is the quintessential [illegible]—as comfortable beating bad guys off-screen as [illegible] and his return, no doubt applying that same impetus that drove him a wrestling force to his latest endeavor, a full [illegible] in Hollywood. As the story goes, The Rock's lead role in *The Scorpion King* was conjured up the instant studio big wigs at Universal saw his first scenes as the ancient asp[illegible] Mathayus in *The Mummy Returns*. The $5.5 million offer made him the highest-paid first lead ever, and the movie's $[illegible] million take made it a good bet on Universal's part. But rather than taking time out to bask in the glow of that distinction and spending some of that cash), The Rock's already diving into his next project, starring opposite Christopher Walken in the upcoming action flick *Helldorado*. And once that's in the can, he'll embark on what could be his franchise in the making, leading Universal's planned silver screen adaptation of the *Spy Hunter* videogame[illegible], and quite possibly delivering the first smack down ever set to the "Theme From Peter Gunn."

Scorpion King made you the highest paid first lead in a movie... ever. Did you have any apprehension going into it?
I wasn't apprehensive; I was excited. I wanted to make sure I was 100% prepared. I wanted to make sure that I had good actors around me, to help, because I needed that help. I still need that help. As a first-time actor—and especially as a lead—I wanted to make sure I was a decent actor in the movie, and I had a great acting coach help me (Larry Moss, who also coached The Rock's good friend and *Scorpion King* co-star Michael Clark Duncan for *The Green Mile*).

You were signed for _Scorpion King_ on the spot during the filming of _Mummy Returns_. How did that go down?
We were over in Morocco filming *Mummy Returns* and the studio executives at Universal were watching the dailies. Kevin Misher, who was president of production at that time [and] who's now my producer for *Scorpion King* and *Helldorado*, turned to Stacy Snider, who's chairman at Universal, and said, "What do you think about making a movie based on his character?" and she said, "I love it." I got a phone call from my agent and he said, "Guess what, I've got great news." And I said, "That sounds great, but I'm sick as a dog. I don't want to hear anything. I just want to hear when I can get out of this country and back home." I got sick in Morocco. I ate bad food, I think.

Your sword handling and fight choreography in _Scorpion King_ were pretty amazing. What sort of preparation did you have to do?
I did a lot of training—a lot of sword fighting, staff fighting, camel riding, horseback riding.

"If I'm not #1 then that's day old stale horse shit, as we say down in Florida."
—The Rock

While you won't see any of his signature WWE moves, The Rock definitely lays the smack down as the Scorpion King.

Are we going to see any wrestling moves—say, a "Scorpion King sting"—come out of the movie?
[*Laughs*] You know what, I've added a couple more moves to my repertoire that I was thinking of on the set, and I've had a chance to lose a little bit of weight and become leaner and more muscular.

What about the reverse, seeing your trademark moves in your films?
No, that's the thing. I wanted to make sure [when] the fans came to see *The Scorpion King*, I'd wink at them in terms of the character of The Rock and give them the "People's Eyebrow," but that was it. I wanted to make sure that since we were at 5000 B.C. and I was the Scorpion King, that I wasn't going to be running around doing pile drivers on anybody.

So you're embarking on your next big role opposite a heavyweight—relatively speaking—like Christopher Walken. How do you feel about it?
I cannot wait. I'm absolutely jacked up about this, to have a guy like Christopher Walken on the movie, to act opposite Christopher Walken, to be in scenes with him. It's a dream come true.

E! ranks you as #20 on their "Toughest Stars of 2002" list, putting you above the likes of Tom Cruise and Vin Diesel. Where's your sight set? Do you want to be the next biggest American action hero?
Who's Number One? I want to know who #1 is and that's my sight. Me at #20—that's fine—and you can name all the [other] actors and actresses. If I'm not #1, then that's day old stale horse shit, as we say down in Florida. (Russell Crowe is currently #1).

Obviously, movies are becoming the biggest part of your career. How's this going to affect your wrestling career with WWE?
I've taken a hiatus through the end of this year and into next year. What I will say is this: that nothing can ever simulate the rush of that live audience and the fans and the energy that they give me. But, in wrestling, there's so much political BS and anything else that comes along with it that I can always do without. It'll never, ever leave me or get out of my blood because I grew up with it, with my grandfather and my dad. Five years ago, I wanted to grow as a wrestler and not much else. Now I want to grow as an actor as well.

Where do you see the WWE going without one of its biggest stars?
You know what? The WWE is just like a treadmill that's always on. It's non-stop; it's like a revolving door. It'll just keep going and going and going. No one can ever lay the smack down on candy asses like The Rock—that's for sure.

Demand on you must be reaching insane proportions. Have you turned anything down?
I haven't turned anything down of major significance. What I'm super excited about is *Spy Hunter*. Universal won a bidding war and got the rights to *Spy Hunter* and for me to play the lead. It's awesome.

Well, that brings up something interesting, since your grandfather, High Chief Peter Maivia, had a brief appearance in the '67 Bond film *You Only Live Twice*. Should we look for an homage to that scene?
Possibly. That's a cool thing, because I watch that scene all the time. If we do something like that, it'd definitely be done in *Spy Hunter*. You know, you have liberties that you can take there. *Spy Hunter* is awesome. I can't wait. **play**

Jackass: The Movie
Paramount
October 25

jason "wee man" acuña • preston lacy

100% JACKASS

words jim ridley

Jackass is one of those things that you'd never expect to catch on. But it's done much more than beef up MTV's market share as a cable network: the show has grabbed viewers firmly by the balls. Like any tattooed freak-a-thon, *Jackass* has proven that the world loves to gawk. Now, with an R-rated, feature-length version of the show about to hit a cineplex near you, viewers will be treated to some of the most volatile stunts to date—a human mouse rolling over hundreds of spring-action traps, a golf cart catapult, and even a not-so-friendly sumo match. *Jackass* veterans **Jason "Wee Man" Acuña** and **Preston Lacy** discuss such foolery.

What compels you to put your bodies through such hell?
Wee Man: Preston, why don't you take this one. [*Laughs*]
Preston: Well, I don't know what compels us; we're trying to make comedy. It's just like *The Three Stooges*; we're just tryin' to set up our comedy bits, get them out there, and make people laugh.
Wee Man: ...but with a handsome look to it. [*Laughs*]
Preston: There's a lot more sexiness, I guess. [*Laughs*] But the injuries, to me, are just like football—you get bruised-up knees, scratches and stuff.

Since a lot of folks don't know, what's the *Jackass* origin story?
Wee Man: There's a magazine called *Big Brother*—it's a skateboard magazine—and they put out skateboard videos. And in-between the normal skateboarding stuff, we did this *Jackass*-y routine to keep people entertained. And a lot of people underground were gettin' the videos just to watch that, so Johnny Knoxville and Jeff Tremaine came up with the idea to just do a whole [show] about that.

I fear to ask the question, but what does an R-rated *Jackass* movie bring us?
Preston: I don't know how much of [that rating] is because of male nudity and how much of it is because of the stunts. [*Laughs*]

So what's the most brutal stunt either of you have ever done?
Wee Man: I think for Preston—I saw it again recently—was him doing the "human wrecking ball." He just about passed out.
Preston: I had a bad-fitting harness on and I got choked off.

What about you, Wee-Man?
Wee Man: One of the main things that went pretty well was when I fell down this 20-foot wall. That even freaked me out. [*Laughs*] Once I landed, I knew I had to jump up to show everyone I was okay, otherwise they'd be in the water lookin' for me.
Preston: It was, like, three stories. It was the "human pinball machine."

Sounds expensive. So how has your MTV-sized budget affected the stunts?
Wee Man: When we were doin' it for *Big Brother*, we weren't even able to build a wall—we didn't even have a budget to do that. So we weren't takin' it over the top. We were just doing frat-house tricks to each other. If we did get hurt, it'd be super minor. And now that we have a budget, we can do things like, "Hey, let's try this now."
Preston: [With our bigger budget] comes an entire safety department. With the thing with the wall, there was a crew there of 50 people with an entire stunt team.
Wee Man: Stunt coordinators, two ambulances. I was set.
Preston: We didn't just build a wall and put the kid on top of it.

What about copycats—anything to say about 'em?
Wee Man: One time in a magazine, we read about these kids chasing each other in their underwear in a parking lot. That's the funniest thing to ever reenact. [*Laughs*] But other than that, I don't think anyone should be playing copycat. We're mainly doin' the show because we think we're funny.

"I don't know how much of [the R rating] is because of male nudity [or] because of the stunts." —*Preston Lacy*

Ghost Ship
Warner Bros.
October 25

interview | steve beck

SEA OF EVIL

words jon m gibson

Although a great fan of the horror genre is a tricky beast. Scaring the audience is one thing, but actually entertaining a crowd full of the critical masses is like trying to tame the beast himself. So even if you didn't particularly like *13 Ghosts* on the overall scheme of things, it was no doubt one of the most stylish fear fests of recent years. It wasn't a classic, but it succeeded in creating a uniquely terrific atmosphere. *Ghost Ship*, the third in the lineup of annual William Castle remakes, gives director **Steve Beck** another go. This time, he's opted for a more subdued vision, one that will hopefully tickle your more cerebral sense of fright. But like any good campfire tale, it's best told in the dark.

13 Ghosts, and now _Ghost Ship_. What's your attraction to the spooky all about?
Beck: It's the story at hand and the visual opportunity that follows. With *13 Ghosts*, I saw an enormous potential with regards to the visual tone of things. That, in itself, seemed an opportunity to raise the bar with the genre. With that in mind, I ran with the project and tried to incorporate as many visual feasts as possible. With *Ghost Ship*, the issue fell into the story category. Here, I had both the visual opportunity to do something remarkable and tell a frightful, compelling story at the same time.

Are you bringing the same visual sensibilities to _Ghost Ship_, too?
Yes, but in *Ghost Ship*'s case, it's a bit more subdued. With *13 Ghosts*, the thought was to treat the film like the original, meaning it was a Halloween party. So with today's sensibilities in mind, we had a party with the film. But *Ghost Ship* has a much more somber tone, so the same aesthetics can't be applied completely. *Ghost Ship* is far more ominous. It has an underlying current of dread throughout, so it works on a different level and has to be thought of and approached that way.

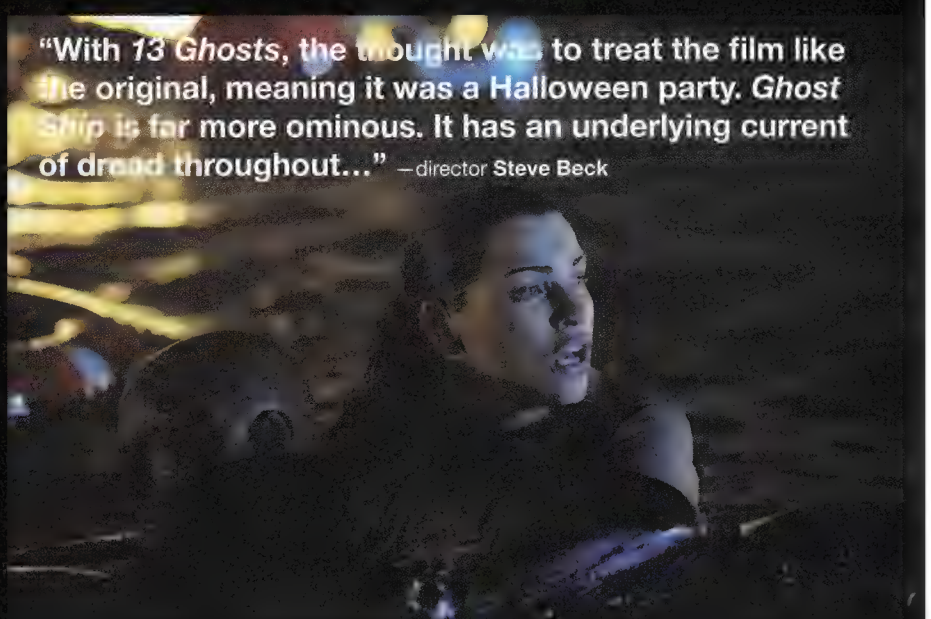
It seems for a horror flick to really deliver, the set itself has to be its own character—the biggest character. You seem to have tapped into that.
The setting simply becomes the theater upon which the most important part of the story takes place: the human story. For me, anything we can do to give the actors more ammunition further endows their ability to tell a powerful story.

Did you always aim to helm a film as director? Previously, you were overseeing the creation some of the most memorable special effects of the last decade—_The Abyss_, _Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade_. Do you see it as a career shift, or are you playing dual roles now?
My strengths have always been helming a vision. My special effects forays were just that: forays. But they taught me quite a bit and I learned from some of the greats. Now, when I head in a particular direction—effects wise—I know how to get there. As far as dual roles go: No, I have but one job—directing.

Since the Castle films have started reemerging, they've attracted a wide variety of Hollywood talent. For you, since you've directed two of the films so far, would you say casting an ensemble horror film is anything like a typical film? Is it hard to get folks interested, since the horror genre isn't necessarily Academy Award caliber?
An ensemble only seems to click if all the actors achieve a certain frequency, comprehending the scope of the work together. From my experience, this seems to happen when the material—or its potential—is there. Otherwise, it seems to be a job of convincing, or rather cajoling the actors to believe something will work. That, too, is the director's job, but that only works to a certain degree. It's the actors who are given the treacherous job of ultimately making a script work. As Juliana told me, and how true it is, no matter what's said and done with the material, at the end of a film it's the actor's faces that are up there.

Ultimately, what would you say the downfalls of the horror genre are—especially in this modern age?
Repeating the past, more than anything else.

What's the easiest way to scare the utter shit out of an audience?
Hit them when they're not expecting it. That's all a scare is. **play**



"With *13 Ghosts*, the thought was to treat the film like the original, meaning it was a Halloween party. *Ghost Ship* is far more ominous. It has an underlying current of dread throughout..." —director **Steve Beck**

The Ring
DreamWorks
October 18

CIRCULAR HELL

words jon m gibson

The concept for *The Ring* is undeniably basic: "There is a videotape. If you watch it, seven days later… you die," warns the film's tagline.

But from that—an eerie, catchy, attractive slogan—spawns a deeper horror, one of great human peril. "I loved this simple plot: You watch this video and the phone rings," Naomi Watts smiles, visibly excited—and possibly a bit panicky—about the deceivingly fundamental story behind *The Ring*. But she's no freshman when it comes to the creepy; after her stint as an aspiring Hollywood starlet in David Lynch's oblique opus, *Mulholland Drive*, she's graduated to prove herself a leading lady in the pitch-black genre of suspenseful horror. "First of all, the video is incredibly scary and very graphic; there are a number of horrible, horrible images [on it]. And the phone rings and you're told you have seven days to live. Just right there, in that one sentence, is a skin-crawling, hair-growing-on-your-back kind of feeling. So that sets up wonderful suspense."

It's just a case of journalistic curiosity that compels Watts' character, Rachel Keller, to find a copy of the mysteriously fatal videocassette; but when she pops the tape into the VCR, it's a frantic marathon of life or death.

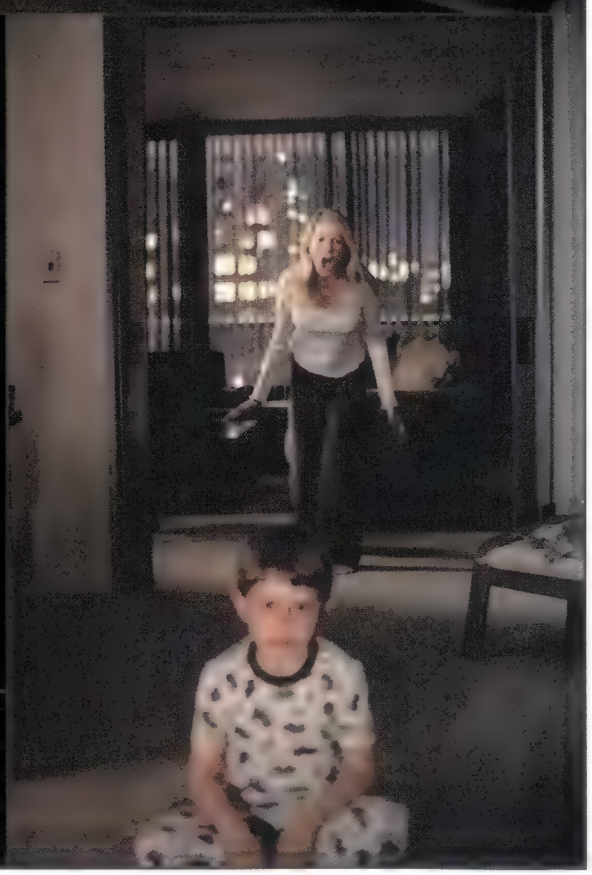
Seven days. The ultimate, tension-coated countdown.

"As the movie goes on, the characters become infected. It's like a virus," co-star Martin Henderson relates. His character, Noah, lends Keller a hand in unlocking the puzzle of the deadly half-inch reel, primed with utterly disturbing—yet visually fascinating—images. "Each day, the metabolic rate of this virus is increasing and, of course, there's less time to get to the source. So it's a race against the clock."

If it's not obvious already, *The Ring* isn't an average dose of chills; it promises to be an extremely stylish trip (especially with director Gore Verbinski attached, who brought his visual bang to the unexpectedly visceral *Mousehunt*). And if the cult fame of the original Japanese film—a successful, low budget, minimalist take on the same concept—is any meter at all, this $60 million American adaptation should strike a cord with a variety of audiences.

Horror fan or not, the psychological nature of *The Ring* is what's so alluring. That is, if you're willing to take the risk and watch. **play**

"As the movie goes on, the characters become infected. It's like a virus. It's a race against the clock." —actor **Martin Henderson**



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jason statham

COURIER CRISIS

"I've been the star in a Luc Besson movie and I still can't believe it. Out of shit, you come out smelling of roses."
—Jason Statham

Luc Besson producing, Cory Yuen directing—you must have been pumped going into production for *Transporter*.
Yeah, obviously. It's a dream come true for me. To work with a great filmmaker like Luc [Besson] and someone like Corey Yuen directing all the action—it's a fantastic combination.

Considering Yuen is a Hong Kong veteran, did he pull you through a meat grinder when it came time to shoot the fight sequences?
Oh yeah, you can imagine. It's a difficult situation for anyone who's never done anything physical. But fortunately, I had a big background in martial arts and it was pretty much just dusting away the cobwebs, getting the flexibility back, and getting the dynamic power going again. It's something I've always had in the bag and something I've always wanted to do on-screen.

Your personal martial arts training must have come in handy then.
Yeah, I don't think there's too many actors that have had the physical background that I've had. I don't think a lot of them are capable of doing their own stunts. I've been doing it since I was a kid.

You've got skills behind the wheel, too.
I've always been messing around in cars. As a kid, we'd go go-kart racing. We'd used to take out sports cars—I stole the car parts—and do doughnuts and 360 turns. I've always derived pleasure out of fast cars and racing them.

You must have gotten banged up during filming, though.
Got a pulled hamstring, torn shoulder—you name it. Lots of bruises, but that's all part of the fun. To get stuck in doing all your own stunts, you have to expect to get battered and bruised. I'm definitely a man that wants to do everything himself, and, I think, that way it's authentic for the audience. [Recently], it's *not* the actors that do the stuff, it's the stuntmen—there's a lot of fast cuts and choppy changes—and you see who's doing what, and I think the audience gets robbed. I insisted I do everything myself and Corey wanted me to because he thought I was more than capable of doing everything that he wanted.

How is it to have a lead character written specifically for you?
Well, it's a bit of an honor, yeah—especially from someone who's as talented as Luc. He's a terrific storyteller and I've watched his movies many, many times—*La Femme Nikita*, *The Professional*, *The Big Blue*. He has a certain flair when it comes to movie-making. The fact that I was going to be sitting in the same room as him was an achievement, and the fact that he was going to make a movie with me—even there, you have to pinch yourself. I've been the star in a Luc Besson movie and I still can't believe it. [*Laughs*] Out of shit, you come out smelling the roses.

Okay, to put you on the spot: Luc Besson vs. Guy Ritchie?
They're very different, [but] the thing that they do have in common is that they're both writers *and* directors. They are the creative hands on the movies that they make. They choose all the music and I think [through] that way, you get to see the true talent shine through, [because] not everybody does that.

So do you find yourself driving a smidgen faster now as a result of *Transporter*?
[*Laughs*] Yeah, I've got a *very* heavy right foot at the moment. **play**

from top)
co-star Shu Qi

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gear

ellula hot air inflatable speakers

$TBD

www.ellula.com

Here's a new one: inflatable speakers. The Ellula Hot Air Series (of which, the C-2 style is shown here) use NXT flat speaker technology with a unique, collapsible shape. Designed for use with PCs, Macs, and gaming systems, the highly unique sound producers are sure to catch your friends' attention. Though we haven't actually gotten to hear the sound quality from these, NXT speakers can sound pretty good, so there is hope.

replay tv

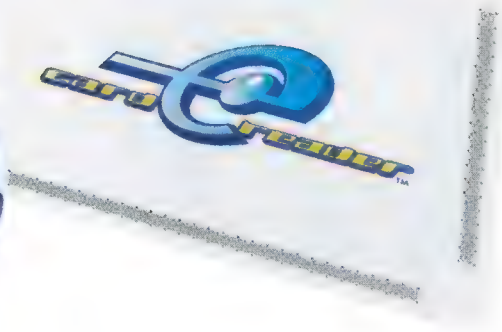
Marc Cohen and **Mark Oleesky** are the hosts of the *Computer and Technology Show* on KABC radio, which can be heard every Saturday morning from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. in Southern California on 790 AM. E-mail them—whether it be questions or just rants—at computershow@kabc.com; or call them on-air at 800/222-KABC.

gear

nintendo e-card reader

$40

www.nintendo.com



What an interesting peripheral this is. Nintendo's e-card reader for Game Boy Advance allows you to scan any number of things into the GBA, whether it be full versions of some classic NES games, or new items for your little *Animal Crossing* world. Games like *Excitebike* and *Donkey Kong Jr.* are available now, and each comes in a little five-card pack (sold separately). Along the edges of each card is a dense strip of printed data (a process developed by Olympus Optical of Japan), which holds the game information. You simply slide each card through the reader a couple of times and—voila—your game is now ready to play. Unfortunately, the e-reader device can only hold one game at a time, so each time you want to play a different game, you've got to re-swipe the cards. But for smaller things, like inputting, say, a new town tune into *Animal Crossing*, a single card does the trick.

mad catz blaster (xbox)

$25

www.madcatz.com

Just in time to play Sega's awesome *House of the Dead III* on Xbox, Mad Catz' Blaster will be the only light gun for Microsoft's behemoth. Thankfully, it has a very usable design with good trigger action and a nice D-pad right within thumb's reach. The build quality is pretty good, and it comes loaded with all the expected third-party tricks, like auto-reload and burst-fire modes (but we don't like to use these cheats, do we?). There's also room for a memory unit in the "clip." Pity about the color, though. This is, of course, America, so the thing can't be a dark color; but even so, this green isn't our cup of tea. Big deal.

WARNING: WHEN THE GAME TURNS OFF, SO DO YOUR POWERS.

You cannot fly. You are not *stronger than a locomotive* or *faster than a speeding bullet*. You have no business attempting to use superpowers outside the realm of *Superman: Shadow of Apokolips*. Any attempt to do so will undoubtedly result in broken legs, arms, fingers and toes, sprained ankles, bruised ribs and egos, loss of limbs, pride, and ultimately-life. Just remember sport, when the game turns off, so do your powers.

INFOGRAMES™

PlayStation.2

EVERYONE E Violence CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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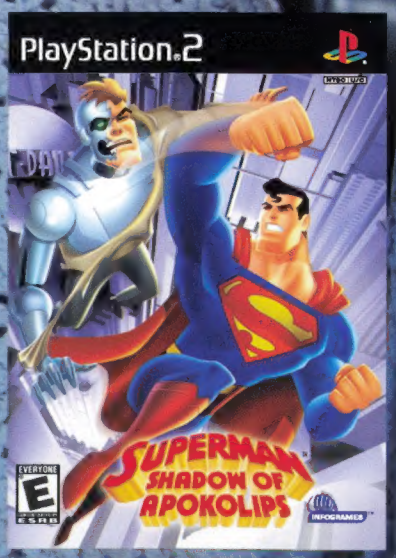
NICE JUMP,
LOSER
YOUR FRIEND, JOE

If this doesn't
get you a date.
NOTHING will
Your
Sis
Anne

www.supermangame.com



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THE MYSTERIOUS.
THE MAGNIFICENT.
THE MASTERPIECE.

The evil Nobunaga's demon warriors wreak havoc across feudal Japan. A noble young warrior, Jubei, returns home to find his once-vibrant village laid to waste by Nobunaga's monstrous minions. Fueled by vengeance, Jubei embarks on an epic quest; one which will reveal his ultimate destiny.

BEST PS2 ADVENTURE GAME E3 2002 – IGN

ONIMUSHA™ 2
Samurai's Destiny

PlayStation®2

CAPCOM
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MATURE M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Violence
Blood and Gore

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